

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S *FANTASY*

Magazine
Issue #23

Mercedes Lackey
Marion Zimmer Bradley
Mike Resnick
An Interview with
Peter Beagle



Cover painting by Vincent Di Fate



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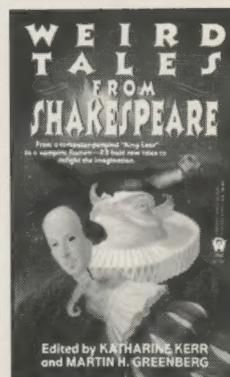
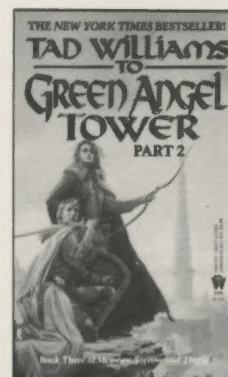
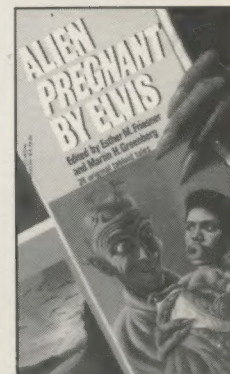
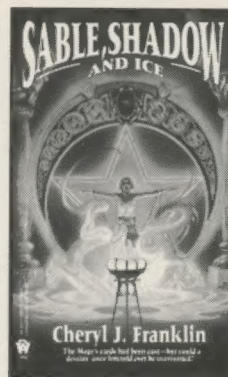
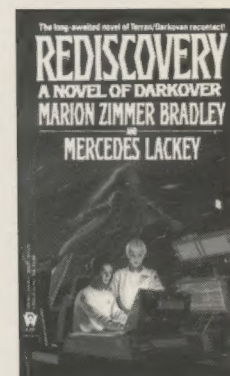
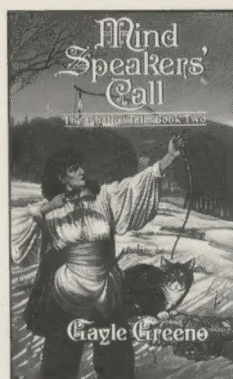
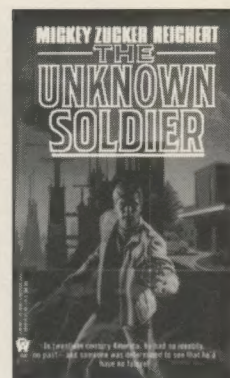
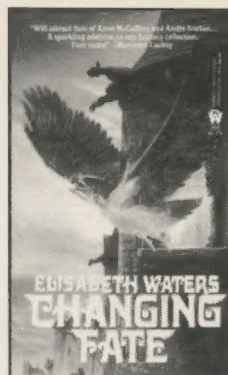
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EDITOR

Marion Zimmer Bradley

PUBLISHER

Rachel E. Holmen

DESIGN

Art Weller

CLERICAL ASSISTANCE

Heather Rose Jones

PROOFREADING

Gil Lamont

Raul Reyes

Debbie Notkin

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Marion Zimmer Bradley's *FANTASY Magazine* welcomes free-lance submissions from people who have read our guidelines. All submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope with adequate return postage.

FANTASY Magazine, a quarterly, publishes original all new short fiction with fantasy elements in the range of 500 to 6,000 words. The most suitable length and the one most often purchased is between 2,500 and 5,000 words. While every precaution will be taken, we cannot assume liability for unsolicited manuscripts. A duplicate should be retained. Sample copies of the magazine are available for writers and artists at a special rate of \$4.00 including postage and handling. Requests for **WRITERS' GUIDELINES** should include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY

Magazine

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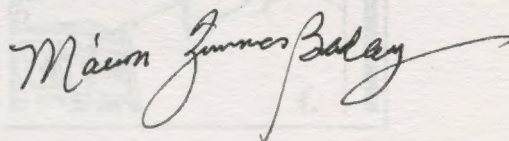
Judging from the mail I get, many people seem to be under the impression that I am a large corporation with a huge budget and gigantic staff. This is not the case. I was a Subchapter S Corporation for a few years, but my accountant asked me to stop that; doing a second set of tax returns for the corporation was a nuisance, and the State of California charged me corporate income tax despite the fact that the corporation was losing several hundred thousand dollars each year. What supports this magazine is my personal income, mostly royalties from *MISTS OF AVALON*.

In the case of manuscripts, this false impression makes it easy to tell who hasn't bothered to read my fiction guidelines before submitting. They are the people who address manuscripts to Rachel Holmen, or to "Fiction Editor" or, if they've seen a market listing somewhere, to "Mr. Bradley". (Mr. Bradley died in 1966.) The guidelines make it quite clear that I am the person to whom manuscripts should be sent, and I assure you all that I am the person who reads them. (Rachel gets to read them after I'm done with them if she wants to; and once I've bought them, Rachel buys artwork, lays out the magazine, and gets it printed.)

Then there are the people who think I have some sort of vast computer network. They want to send me electronic submissions. In fact, I work at the dining room table, far from any computer. Raul, who logs the manuscripts in and out and types up the rejection letters, persuaded me to stop using the kitchen table by saying that authors did not deserve to have their manuscripts returned with tea stains and/or orange marmalade on them. I don't even particularly like computers, and I'm not on any of the commercial services. (And I hate dot-matrix printers; they're much too hard for me to read.)

My subscription department is named Heather, who is also (I think) the shipping department. I don't concern myself too much with how the work is divided up as long as it gets done. I consider myself very fortunate to have employees who are willing to do the work of several people apiece. The downside to this is that when even one employee is away, it's like having several people gone.

In addition to the three employees who work on the magazine, and the new part-time trainee I just hired, I have my personal secretary, Elisabeth. Elisabeth is the one whose reaction to the news that I wanted to start my own magazine was, "You and what army?" followed by, "If I wanted to work on a magazine I'd have stayed at *Locus*". (She lasted about a month there.) But she is willing to pitch in with some of the clerical work when the rest of the staff is getting swamped, and she does take care of the legal/financial end of things (like processing the contracts and paying the bills). She has also done three stories and one interview for the magazine, so she's not totally hopeless, even if she couldn't paste up a page straight to save her soul. But she was the one who insisted that what I really needed if I wanted to produce my own magazine was Rachel — and she was right.



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by Mercedes Lackey; art by Vincent Di Fate

A "Diana Tregarde" story

Mother's Demon Helper

by P.E. Cunningham; art by George Barr

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Never Doubt a Sorcerer

by John P. Buentello; art by Julia Lacquement-Kerr

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Diana Tregarde stared at her lover's back for five full minutes while his long, graceful fingers flew over the keyboard of her computer. For all she could tell, he was completely oblivious to her presence. That was not like him at all — a two-hundred-year-old vampire does *not* abandon himself in a task so completely that he ignores his immediate environment. Not if he wants to see his third century, at any rate.

Oh well. At least he was safe enough here in the apartment. She had enough mystical shielding on the place to stave off a psychic nuke.

"I've created a monster," Di muttered to herself. "I should never have shown him the modem."

"Cherie?" he replied, absently — still typing. He didn't even take his eyes off the screen.

"Nothing," she sighed. Well, her office was effectively occupied for the rest of the evening, and so was her computer. It wasn't as if she *needed* the desktop computer to work on the romances that paid the bills. Compared to her laptop, it was archaic, only a 286, so slow it barely kept up with Andre LeBrel's flying fingers. She actually preferred the laptop, if it came down to it. "Just — tell me you aren't hacking again."

"I am not hacking again," he said, then stopped typing long enough to flash her an insouciant smile over his shoulder, tossing a lock of hair out of his eyes with a flick of a finger. She smiled back; it was impossible not to. *Sara says he looks like Timothy Dalton. Ha. Timothy Dalton should look so cute.* He didn't turn right back to the keyboard. "I must admit, I fail to see why you should be concerned about my intrusions into cyberspace when they do no harm. I have simply established myself in your world using the only tools at my disposal."

"Cyberspace?" she replied incredulously, as his dark brown eyes gazed at her solemnly. "Cyberspace? Have you been overdosing on *Spin* magazine again?"

"After all," he continued, never missing a beat, "How else was I to acquire a driver's license and a Social Security number? We are in the 90s, *cherie*. I

cannot simply present myself at Ellis Island as an immigrant from some obscure nation."

Di nodded reluctantly. She hadn't asked how he'd gotten that Social Security number, but she knew he had a lot of friends on the computer nets that were dubious at best... "But it's not legal," she protested weakly.

"Neither am I," he pointed out. "I am certain that laws condemning my kind are still

Killer Byte

BY MERCEDES LACKEY

extant; a century ago, people believed in vampires enough to legislate against their mere existence. I *know* there are laws still in effect against yours."

Well, he had her there. There were laws against witches on the books all over the country that had never been repealed. "Just don't get caught," she pled. He only smiled.

"Anything that might be illegal I do on the terminals in the offices of many different professors at the university," he reassured her. "Nothing can be traced back to you."

Thus adding breaking-and-entering to his sins. She only shook her head. "I don't want to know any more," she replied. "I'm going to be working in the living room, let me know if you find something interesting on those bulletin boards of yours."

Andre had taken to the computer nets and bulletin boards with the facility of someone a tenth his age. Why? Di had no idea — except that to survive as long as he had, there was no choice but to be flexible enough to adapt to anything. And since her energy usually gave out about 3 A.M., the boards and nets gave him people to talk to, even at that late hour, people who he need never fear would learn his true nature.

Not that Andre's "addiction" was without its benefits to her. He always checked the "romance" topics on the various boards for her, and now and again there was something flattering there about one of her books. And her literary agent Murray had gotten mod-

ern enough to use electronic mail, which meant that even though her schedule didn't overlap much with his, now he could always "reach" her. Andre's hobby paid for itself in that alone.

She left him tapping away in the spare room she had converted to her office, and went back to her laptop in the living room. Her favorite corduroy chair was more comfortable than sitting at the desk, anyway; the light was better here, and the stereo in the living room infinitely superior to the old one in the office. She lost herself in the intricacies of plot for some time, and actually let out a yelp of surprise when Andre tapped her shoulder.

"What?" she barked at him, irrationally annoyed because he'd frightened her. He ignored the tone, his dark eyes shadowed with a vague worry.

"I'd like you to come look at something, if you would, *cherie*," he said instead of making an angry retort. "I — it might be important, but I do not trust my own judgment on it."

With a sigh, she saved the chapter she had been working on, turned off the machine, and followed him back into the office.

"I have a file I made of this topic from one of the bulletin boards," he said, "It is a local board, but it can be accessed from the Internet. Those posting to it are mostly local." He shrugged, with a hint of embarrassment. She wondered why, as she took the chair.

"So what's the topic?" she asked as she took over the chair.

He looked even more embarrassed. "Vampires," he replied shortly, then reached over her shoulder and called up the file.

She raised an eyebrow. "What, looking for someone to double-date with?" Then, as she scrolled through the messages posted to the board, she understood his embarrassment. For the most part, the writers seemed to be young, many female, and all so enraptured with what they supposed to be the vampiric lifestyle that she could only think of them as "vampire groupies".

After one passionate paean that began with the vehement assertion that Anne Rice was a goddess and ended with the longing for a boy who was presumably ignoring the writer to come to his senses and whisk her away to New Orleans where they would find someone to bite them and lead an idyllic nocturnal existence, she chuckled. "Oh heavens. They're missing Anne



Artwork by Vincet Di Fate

Rice's points completely. I hope this wasn't what you were worried about," she told Andre as he leaned over her shoulder to keep track of where she was in the file. "Next year she'll be into neo-hippies and reading Tom Wolfe and Ken Kesey, wishing someone would drive up to her in a paisley bus and whisk her away to baffle and befuddle Middle America with the Merry Pranksters."

But Andre shook his head. "Not that," he replied. "I simply wanted you to get the flavor of the postings. There are many young ladies like this one, some few people attempting a kind of episodic fiction which everyone knows is fiction, and many recommending books or discussing vampirism, hotly defending one author's depiction over all others. No, this is not what I am worried about. You will reach the point where it starts, shortly."

She continued to skim through the messages —

Then she suddenly paged back, and read one of them more carefully.

It was, ostensibly, a posting from a young man with some sort of job —

never specified — that required him to travel with a laptop computer. He claimed that because of his lifestyle, it was impossible to make friends or keep them. He was deliberately mysterious, never even describing what it was he did, only that it fit his "needs" for a nocturnal life. Whoever he was, he was quite articulate as he described his attempt to contact an old girlfriend, and discovering that "more than years had parted them irrevocably."

"What is this," she muttered to herself, rereading the posting, "Some kind of electronic High Plains Drifter?"

Andre made a little approving sound in the back of his throat but said nothing.

She frowned, when she got to the end. Bulletin boards tended to allow people to take whatever names or callsigns they wanted. His was "Shadow-walker".

She frowned even more as she encountered further postings from this "Shadow-walker". Without actually coming out and saying anything, he implied that his job was very important and mysterious, possibly high-

security — and he implied that he was a real, live vampire, or something like one.

And he had everyone who posted to this topic enthralled. All the other threads of conversation stopped dead; there were no more attempts at serialized fiction or even poetry. Even the Anne Rice devotee was silenced. The only topics now concerned "Shadow-walker" and his travels and misadventures.

The topic ended with "Shadow-walker" supposedly in a hospital, suffering from the effects of a beating after defending a gay man from a group of fag-bashers. The outpouring of sympathy was actually rather touching, except —

"What's wrong with this picture?" she asked aloud.

"Taken as a story?" Andre replied. "Inconsistencies, for one. In this last posting, he claims that the nurse is never there to aid him because she is afraid of him — yet two postings ago, the nurse was supposedly helping him to type because his wrist was broken. Perhaps he has true vampiric healing



Artwork by Vincnet Di Fate

powers, in which case, *why* has he permitted anyone to take him to a hospital where he might be uncovered? If he does not, he is lying. Also, I do not believe that it is a very easy thing to use hospital telephones for access to computer nets. Nor do I believe they would encourage such a thing."

"That's true, most of them go through some kind of switchboard because there are only a limited number of outside lines," she replied, chewing on a fingernail. "And if I were someone in In-

telligence I certainly wouldn't keep anyone around who is as mouthy on boards as *this* bozo is. Oh, he's a fake, all right. And I wouldn't worry about it, if he was just some fat slob living in his mother's basement, trying to score with girls electronically. But I don't think he is..."

"Ah!" Andre's expression cleared. "Good, then I am *not* being paranoid and suspicious?"

"Oh, you're being paranoid and suspicious all right, but in your case, that's

healthy, and your instincts have him targeted right," she told him, taking one of his cool hands in hers. "Let me go back to his first entry —"

She paged back through the entries, this time looking at the replies. "Look, he gets a lot of responses, but look at the ones he answers — no one you can tell from the callsign or the language is male, no one who seems to be much over the age of seventeen. *Those* he answers personally, with little warm salutations and thanks for their con-

cern. I don't like it, Andre. I don't like it at all."

He squeezed her hand, and covered her fingers with his free hand. "There is this — naiveté in this world of pixels," he said soberly. "These children — children and those who are unworldly — seem to be under the impression that everyone who has access to this place is a good person, and that they really *know* someone just because they have had conversation with him here."

She shivered. "You just painted a stalker's dream come true," she replied, slowly. "The only safety on those boards is the fact that the postings and ident-records only show what city you're posting from, and not your real name or address —"

"And what if one of these children were to give that information to this Shadow-walker?" he asked sharply. "He is *not* limited to posting, you know. Read the later postings, there is a hint that he has been exchanging electronic mail with one or more of them."

Feeling the blood draining from her face, she paged back to the end, and saw exactly what he was talking about. "Oh my gods —" she whispered.

He pulled a second chair up to the terminal, and pushed her gently out of the way. "I wanted you to see this, *cherie*," he said, hands flying over the keyboard as he exited the file and began to log on to the bulletin board again. "I wanted you to know why I feared, to show you all this precisely because what I am about to do is illegal. I do not believe I will be caught, but still — imagine Ted Bundy with such a tool at his command. He would not need to hunt his victims — they would tell him everything he needed to know, and might even have gone to him willingly!"

"What are you going to do?" she asked, a chill running down her back-bone.

"Use the password and ID of a systems operator who is on a cruise and not likely to find out what I have done," he said succinctly. "I stole it; I have similar passwords and IDs on most of the boards I frequent, in case I need to — alter something. An advantage is that this is a local board and I know most of the sysops by first name, so I *know* when they are going to be out of the way. I wish to get into this Shadow-walker's electronic mail files. I wish to see who he has been talking to — and

what was being said!"

Di couldn't even begin to follow what Andre was doing. He flitted from one command-screen to another, occasionally noting down a number or a word. Finally, though, he gave an exclamation of satisfaction, and the hard-drive began to whirl as he downloaded something.

He quickly closed the session out and logged off. "I have not been able to make this session invisible," he muttered to himself as much as to her, "But with any luck, my unwitting accomplice will think that one of the other sysops used his account to check on the Shadow-walker —"

While he spoke, he keyed in the name of his file, and brought it up onto the screen. "There!" he said with grim satisfaction. "Now we will see who he truly is and where he is from, then what this one says when he does not think he is observed!"

The first file was supposed to be the real profile on this "Shadow-walker". It held — nothing of any use. Only the ironic name "John Smith", and a mail-service drop-box. Unfortunately, this particular computer board was a free service, which meant there was no real information — like a credit-card number.

If she had been chilled before, she was frozen before they reached the end of the file. "Shadow-walker", whoever he was, had been doing more than just toy with a few select girls. He'd been playing skillfully on their emotions and extracting information from them. Most of them had evidently gotten frightened at some point and stopped responding — but one came fully under the spell of his words.

He was telling the truth about one thing, at any rate. He *was* traveling; he had posted from a dozen different cities over the last year or so.

That did not make her feel any better.

"One wonders how many other boards he is prowling," Andre said in a flat voice, breaking the silence, "In how many other cities."

Di didn't respond; she was too busy reading the latest set of e-mail exchanges. Finally the one she had been dreading and expecting scrolled up onto the screen.

"Shadow-walker" was coming to Hartford.

And now that the little fish had his hook firmly in her mouth, he set it.

"*Merde*," Andre hissed as he read the

exchange of letters, all posted within the last few days. Well he might swear. "Nightshade", aka Brenda Doyle age fifteen, had given "Shadow-walker" her real name, address, and phone number.

But worse was to come.

"Shadow-walker" professed wanting to meet her, to talk with her, told her that she was older by far than her years and that she was the first woman (not girl, *woman*, and what fifteen-year-old could resist that blandishment?) to really understand him. "*But your parents aren't going to approve of me*," he went on.

"With reason," Di growled.

"*They'll say I'm too old for you, and I don't exactly look like a solid citizen. I can't help that; I've told you how my bosses want me to look like a street-wise kind of dude, to keep people from noticing me.*" He went on at some length how it was necessary that she not tell her parents of his interest in her, urging her even to purge her own files of any copies of his letters she might have kept. "*It might put you and them in danger*," he wrote, as if he cared. "*You make a lot of dangerous enemies in my line of work, and they wouldn't hesitate to try to hurt me by hurting you.*"

"Oh, indeed," Andre said sardonically. "I believe I can predict what he will ask for next."

Di nodded, and went to the next screen-page.

"*I'd like to meet you somewhere alone.*"

And Brenda agreed, in a letter posted just this evening, suggesting a pizzeria just across from the university.

"*Sacre merde.*" Andre leapt to his feet as if he was ready to go out then and there and try to stop the girl.

"Hold your horses, D'Artagnan," Di cautioned him, placing one hand on his shoulder to restrain him. "He hasn't seen this letter yet —"

"That we *know* of," Andre protested, his eyes flashing with emotion, his fists clenched. "He could be calling her on the telephone at this very moment!"

"Not if he's that insistent that she not let her parents know he exists," she replied, chewing on her thumbnail thoughtfully and leaning back in her chair. "No, I don't think he'll risk calling and having her parents pick up the phone instead of Brenda. He's a sharp cookie, this one. He'll set up the meeting via e-mail."

"Which means I must needs play electronic sleuth and watch for it." Andre

let out his breath slowly. "This, I can do. Then what?"

"Then he meets with Brenda," Di told him, with ice in her veins, and steel in her voice. "But not the way he thinks. And not alone."

Brenda was just as young and vulnerable-looking as Di had guessed, and unfortunately, was just as attractive as she had feared. She affected the pale makeup and all-black clothing that seemed to be a uniform for the "vampire groupies", but her healthy, slender figure and long, immaculately-styled dark hair made her look more like one of the vampire's victims than a vampire herself.

"Shadow-walker" had rejected the pizza-parlor as being too public, warning her that his "enemies" made such public meetings dangerous. Finally she agreed to meet him in this unlikely spot, a little park in the midst of office buildings, a place that he himself suggested. Here she sat on a cold cement bench, illuminated by the single strategically-placed light that served the entire courtyard, bundled in the black cloak she had probably made herself, starting at every sound, looking around anxiously.

There weren't many sounds for her to start at; although it wasn't even eleven o'clock yet, the place was as deserted as a graveyard. The buildings here were guarded by electronic security, not human guards, and once quitting time came, you probably could have set off a bomb here and not hurt anyone. It was a perfect place for someone to go who didn't want to be seen. That in itself suggested that this wasn't the first time Shadow-walker had met someone here. The only living beings Di and Andre had spotted were the incurious personnel of a cleaning service, whose blank gazes told her they

deliberately noticed nothing that did not immediately concern them.

Di had taken up a station in a shadowy little alcove within sprinting distance of the street and her car, in full view of a security camera, but not of anyone in the courtyard. Andre was somewhere just above the street outside the courtyard. Above it, not on it; his vampiric nature gave him some rather interesting abilities that came in handy in situations like this one. Di had wanted to wait in her car, but there was no place for Andre to perch on the walls that faced the courtyard, and they had found the alcove where she could hide. It was a division of strength she didn't like, but it couldn't be helped.

Other than finding places to wait and watch in, they had no other plans, there hadn't been time or information enough to make any. So far as Di was concerned, the very best thing that could happen tonight would be that Brenda would sit here, getting colder and colder, until she finally gave up and went home. Her heart would be broken, briefly, but she'd learn a painless lesson.

The worst thing that could happen—

That he'll grab her and hurt her before we can get to her. He can do it, if he's fast. He could even kill her...

The trouble was, they only had suspicions, no facts — paranoia, but nothing solid to base it on. So they could only watch and wait, and hope they were being foolish and alarmist. And they dared not act until Shadow-walker himself had done something to prove he was as sinister as they feared. After all, the man could still be some asocial nerd living in his mother's basement, or a harmless vampire-groupie with a glib line and an overactive imagination.

Di caught the sound of a small car pulling up before the girl did. Brenda

jumped to her feet as she had a dozen times before as the car-door shut quietly. Her cape swirled around her as she turned to face the street entrance of the courtyard, one hand going to her throat, color rising in her cheeks.

She looked just like one of Di's Gothic romance covers.

But the man who walked across the cement toward her was no Fabio, although he wasn't bad-looking. He'd done himself a disservice with his description of himself; he was no overweight couch-potato, and he had a decent-looking face. Except for the longish hair and the slightly sinister black duster he wore, he didn't look anything like the streetwise tough he'd called himself. But there was something about that blandly attractive face that disturbed Di, the feeling that the face was nothing more than a facade that covered something else entirely.

But Brenda was thrilled to see him, that much was obvious from her body language. She stared up into his face as he spoke briefly to her, in tones too low for Di to make out what he said.

He was in a hurry, and impatient. It was clear from his gestures that he wanted to leave this courtyard and he wanted Brenda to go with him. She shook her head reluctantly.

"I can't; the buses stop running after midnight, and how would I get home? We can stay here as long as you want," she said plaintively, raising her voice enough that now Di heard her. "No one is ever here after five. I don't mind the cold, not really..."

"There could be security people, cleaning crews —" He shook his head angrily. "You know I can't risk being seen! Let's get out of here, now."

But Brenda pulled away from him a little, and glanced down doubtfully at her watch. "You said you'd be here an hour ago — it's getting really late, and



Artwork by Vincnet Di Fate

my parents are going to wonder —"

Without warning, he backhanded her across the face, clearly as hard a blow as he could deliver. She let out a strangled squeak and fell against the cement bench she had been sitting on, hitting her head. As she sat there in a heap, stunned, he grabbed her hand and hauled her to her feet, dragging her towards the street. He moved incredibly fast; he was already out of sight and Di heard the car doors slamming before she was even halfway across the courtyard!

The car started as she reached the sidewalk and she reached towards it, ineffectively; it was a brown Ford Escort, the most completely forgettable car in the universe, with the numbers of the license-plate artistically obscured with mud and dirt. His tires screeched as he started to pull away from the curb; there was no way she was going to reach her car in time to catch him.

Then again, she didn't have to.

Andre materialized out of the darkness above the street, landing on hands and knees on the Escort's hood with a crash.

That was followed by a second crash, this time of breaking glass, as he smashed the glass of the windshield, reached through the hole, and pulled the driver through out onto the hood.

As Andre dragged Shadow-walker across the broken glass, the Escort swerved, hit the curb and jumped it. The engine died as it ended up with its nose up against a lamppost.

Andre rolled off the hood with his hand around Shadow-walker's throat, taking the man with him. Di ran to the car and tried to pull open the passenger's side door as he stood up and lifted Shadow-walker off his feet; the door was locked, and Brenda stared at her through the glass in a state of wide-eyed shock. A huge bruise mottled the girl's cheek, and her tears streaked her makeup. Di didn't waste any time trying to get her to respond; she smashed the glass of the window with her elbow and unlocked the door, dragging the girl out, covered in safety-glass pellets.

Brenda ignored her; her eyes were locked on Andre, and she whimpered softly, trembling in Di's hands.

Andre took his eyes off Shadow-walker for a scant instant, staring at Brenda and making certain she saw him clearly — the glowing eyes, the unmistakable fangs — "*No one hunts in*

my territory and lives," he growled, in a completely unhuman voice. There was a sound of breaking bones, and the man's whole body shuddered and danced in Andre's grip.

Then he lowered Shadow-walker to the ground, and slowly, deliberately, put his fangs to the man's neck.

Di stared herself, held by a mixture of revulsion and fascination, as Andre fed. This was a side of him she knew existed, but had never seen. Brenda made a mewling sound and hid her face in Di's shoulder.

Then, as suddenly as he had appeared, Andre was gone, and Shadow-walker was nothing more than a crumpled heap of cloth and slack flesh in the middle of the sidewalk.

It was time to call the police.

"I never knew you could be such a messy eater," Di said, finally, breaking the too-heavy silence in the car.

"It is not something I — indulge in often, *cherie*," the vampire replied, finally. "You know my senses are more acute than yours — in the instant before I pulled the *bête* through his windshield, I saw he had rope, guns, tape and knives in the rear seat. Wherever he was taking the girl, it was not to a midnight picnic." He touched her arm. She was proud of herself; she wasn't shaking. "The police?"

"Bought my story that I was doing some late work at the bank." She sighed. "Whether the girl will *ever* tell them how she met Shadow-walker, or even that he *wasn't* a random stranger, I don't know. I hope she does — but since she has no real sense of what she escaped, I don't know if she will."

Andre brooded over that. "In a way, I hope that she will — and I also hope that she will not. There are intrusions enough into the nets without having electronic police watching everything that is posted, and assuming the worst of every remark. But —"

"But how many other girls did that bastard murder that he found on the nets?" Di retorted angrily. "One or more in every city he posted from? If you people won't police and protect your own, then —"

Andre held up a hand to forestall her. "You preach, as they say, to the choir, *cherie*. I agree with you. This — this sea of pixels that we swim in represents power, and with power comes responsibility. We are children playing at the edge of the ocean, making

castles of sand, except that *we* control that ocean to a very real extent. If we do not exercise some responsibility, that control *will* be taken from us." He sighed, then uttered something Di had not expected — a dry chuckle.

"Hmm?" she said, turning the car into the entrance of her parking-lot.

"Oh, only this. That dramatic presentation for the girl's sake. I wanted to be certain she would not see me as a romantic rescuer. After seeing me, hearing me — there will be one less vampire groupie upon the nets."

She echoed his ironic chuckle. "I doubt she'll ever be able to face an Anne Rice novel again. Do you suppose I might gain a new reader out of this?"

He raised an eyebrow. "It could happen. I left e-mail to her suggesting she read **THUNDER AND ROSES**. She could do worse."

Di looked closely at him before she exited the car. There was no trace of the violent, terrifying creature she had seen kill Shadow-walker. She might have imagined him...

Perhaps, in a way, she had. Andre had played many parts to survive in his time, and he was a consummate actor. It could be that the horrifying killer she had glimpsed for a moment was nothing more than one of those parts he played.

One thing she knew; the real Andre was the one who had just spoken of power and responsibility, the one who had moved ruthlessly to protect an innocent. *That* was the Andre she loved.

"There's still plenty of night left," she said, as she came to that conclusion. "I have work —"

"And I have the nets." He grinned crookedly. "Policing my own, if you like?"

In the end, that was the answer that mattered.



MERCEDES LACKEY lives in Oklahoma with her husband, artist Larry Dixon, in a house that looks like a flying saucer. She is the author of the popular "Valdemar" and "Diana Tregarde" series, among others. Her hobbies include falconry and managing a diverse assortment of pets.

VINCENT DI FATE lives in New York state and has received the Hugo, Skylark, and Lensman Awards for his artwork. He is a past president of ASFA and was the Artist Guest of Honor at the 1992 WorldCon.



The stench within the hut was overpowering. Surrounded by its fetid fumes, Smoke glided toward the table, human in shape but not human at all, tall and slender and supernaturally graceful, as only a demon can be. Her eyes, the shifting blue-gray of wood smoke, fixed with cold malevolence upon the girl-child lying helpless before her.

The child whimpered at the demon's approach. Smoke reached down to touch her hair, six reed-slim fingers tangling in the fine chestnut strands in an icy caress. "Be still," the demon purred. "This will not hurt."

The child would not be still. She squirmed and whined. Her protests rose to shrieks as the demon fumbled with her wrapping's pinnings. Finally, more through luck than any skill, Smoke got the diaper loose.

"Will you be quiet!" she snapped at the howling girl. "This doesn't hurt and you know it!"

Hellfire! How could something so small produce such a mess? Smoke lifted the soggy diaper in two fingers and flung it away with a quick, violent snap of her wrist. Not even the Church's paraphernalia could inspire such loathing in her. She had existed for two thousand years, had been bound to and served near as many masters, but none had ever made such demands on her patience, nor subjected her to such indignities.

Mother's Demon Helper

When my term of service is done, Ellina, she vowed, you will roast in the deepest pit the imps can dig for you. Slowly.

But Smoke was still a demon bound, and she must fulfill the tasks set upon her. Even this. She bathed the girl's bottom, rubbed it with soft scented oil, and somehow got a fresh diaper folded around the girl. The child had stopped screaming and now crooned off-key while she played with her fingers, her earlier tantrum forgotten.

"You're too big for this," Smoke snarled at the child. "Hasn't your mother housebroken you yet?"

"Thorry," the child lisped. "I forgot."

Father of all demons, Smoke silently cursed. Ellina was an incompetent witch, restricted to the simplest plant and herbal lore, but this one bit of true magic she'd got letter perfect. Damn her to the Pit. "Next time you soil yourself, go to your mother. Let her deal with you."

She set the girl on the floor, far more gently than she wanted to. The child heard a bird singing and dashed out of the hut to investigate. Smoke released a hiss of a sigh. This was no fit existence for a demon.

Smoke found Ellina in her garden, picking and sorting herbs. The woman sang a song to each as she clipped off its leaves. As if the plant cared, Smoke thought. These human witches, so

proud of their pitifully tiny store of knowledge. They knew nothing of true magic.

She padded silently up behind Ellina, treading on as many shoots as she could. "You should teach your whelp to clean itself," she said.

Ellina jumped, as Smoke had intended. The woman stared, not at Smoke, but beyond her. "Where's Jini?"

"Somewhere nearby." Smoke inspected a paw. She had taken on the form of a lynx; the plush pelt and tufted ears appealed to her vanity, while the claws, destruction sheathed in velvet, appealed to her nature. "She's safe. I can be at her side before you can draw breath. You panic too easily, Ellina."

"I charged you with protecting her. Go to her and stay with her. Now."

Smoke's muzzle wrinkled in a feline sneer. "I told you, she's in no danger. If you don't like the way I perform my duties" — the lynx's purr turned silky — "you're free to release me and find another."

Ellina tightened her lips. Smoke was all the witch's strength had been able to draw and bind, and the both of them knew it. "You're what I've got," she told the demon, "and you're what I'll keep. You will stay with my daughter at all times. Is that understood?"

The lynx bared her fangs. "Really, Ellina. My powers could make you an

empress. Wouldn't that be more fun than singing to plants? You ought to let me do something interesting for you."

Ellina's mouth twisted in a bitter smile. "I summoned a demon to watch out for my daughter, and that's what you're going to do. Pray your life gets no more interesting than this."

"Demons never pray," Smoke reminded her.

"Fulfill your duties, then, and I'll pray for the both of us."

"Save your breath. And hoard your strength against a time of your own need. No demon can be bound forever." Smoke swirled into an ugly miniature thunderhead, and vanished.

Outside the garden, away from the sickening floral reek and that nails-on-bone scraping sound humans called singing, Smoke resumed her human shape, almost. Her face remained that of a lynx, ears pressed against her skull and lips drawn back in a terrible snarl. The hiss that boiled up out of her throat would have steamed the bark from a tree.

Failure! Constant, frustrating failure! Nothing — not threats, not sloppiness of duty, not verbal cuts and gibes, could provoke Ellina into releasing her. What deed would it take, how far must she go, to win her freedom? It was beginning to look as if only Ellina's death would liberate her.

Smoke's hiss flattened into a sigh. When she first

by P. E. Cunningham

learned the tasks she'd been summoned for, Ellina's eventual agonizing punishment had been her ultimate goal. Now, all she wanted was to return to her own familiar corner of Hell and never have to look at or smell another stinking diaper again.

More tuneless shrilling rose from the woods, at the edge of the clearing Smoke had blasted around Ellina's hut. Now the whelp was singing, a bad habit picked up from her mother. Smoke growled and tamped her lynx's face into its woman's mask. She'd tried scaring the brat by assuming different menacing forms, but the child only laughed in delight at the demon's contortions. As brainless as her dam.

Jini had found a field rose and plopped herself down next to it. She was singing to the weed's single bud. Smoke forced a smile to her face as she neared her charge. Perhaps if she feigned bland pleasantry, the child would grow bored and ignore her, and Smoke could survive another afternoon.

Jini's squawking grew louder. The tiny bud trembled, without a breeze to

move it. Suddenly it opened with an audible pop, and within a heartbeat bloomed into a bright green rose.

Smoke halted. Even she knew mortal roses were red. As she watched, other buds appeared, and blossomed yellow, purple, blue, and orange. Then all five roses rippled with all the bands of the spectrum, while Jini clapped her hands and gurgled with delight.

Smoke sniffed the ether and smelled magic. Magic in the roses, magic in the child. Masking a rush of undemonic wonder, she sank beside Jini with boneless grace, like fine silk pooling on the ground. The blades of grass did not bend beneath her. "That's quite a flower you've found there," she said.

"Uh huh."

Smoke touched a petal of one bloom with her finger. Instantly the rippling stopped, freezing the rose into a marbled rainbow. "Did the flower do this by itself, or did you help?"

"I helped." The child patted the rose, and the waves of color resumed.

Smoke peered down her nose at the plant. This was high-order magic, far beyond Ellina's limited store of knowl-

edge. Smoke had certainly never shown the brat any demon's tricks. "Who taught you how to do this?" she asked.

"Nobody." A butterfly floating past distracted her. Jini hopped up and ran after it. Without her will to prompt them, the swirling colors flowed to a gradual halt, leaving five huge riotous harlequin blossoms to confront and confound the puzzled Smoke.

Magic in a human. And so young, with none to teach it to her. Even Ellina, dull as she was, must have noticed. Or suspected. Smoke's expression darkened. Were there perhaps reasons beyond her knowing, that Ellina might have wanted to bind a demon to look after her child?

Jini's shriek ripped across the meadow, shrill with terror. Smoke exploded into a whirlwind and flashed toward the sound. Protect my daughter, her summoner bade her, and she was bound to obey.

Had she been given a choice, however, Smoke might have paused, for she recognized the creatures bearing down on the screaming girl. They looked at first glance like a pack of



Artwork by George Barr

black wolfdogs, but in fact were no more dogs than Smoke was a woman. They panted clouds of brimstone, and flinched beneath the sun. Smoke's eyes narrowed. It took a powerful master to force hellhounds up from the Pit into daylight. They squinted hot-ember eyes against the unfamiliar glare and closed in on the child.

Instantly Smoke flung herself between them, and wrapped her vaporous form about the girl. The hounds scented demon and whimpered, but came on. "This child is in my care," she warned them. "Threaten her at your peril. Who sent you?"

The lead hound growled but would not answer. The pack surrounded them. Jini clutched at Smoke's incorporeal form. She solidified into a monstrous viper with the girl secure within her coils, and bared scimitar fangs at the hellhounds. "Stay back, or I strike! Who is your master?"

A hellhound rushed her from behind. Smoke lashed her neck around and sank her fangs into the hound's shoulder. The creature howled and fell back. Smoke recovered in time to strike out at another's muzzle. She missed, but her fangs left burning scores. She could not kill them — like herself, they were deathless — but she could give them pain. "You're wasting your time," she told them. "Others will hear you, and come" — Others. Ellina. Ha! — "to aid me."

"The child is our prey," the lead hound rasped. "We've been hunting her for months. Give her to us."

Smoke stretched her neck and swayed her viper's head above them. "I cannot. I am bound. Return to your master. Let him face me, if he dares." She focused her glare upon the lead dog, but he refused to wither. "What does a demon want with a human child, anyway?"

"He didn't say. He only bade us bring her." The hound's hindquarters tensed. Smoke drew back her head and prepared to meet his charge.

A flask flew into the midst of them, and exploded right under the hellhound's muzzle. Its liquid contents sprayed his chest and forelegs.

The hellhound shrieked as if he'd been scalded. Steam rose from his midnight fur. Smoke abandoned her viper guise for that of the woman, and shrank as close to Jini as she could, avoiding the puddle in the grass. Holy water could damage her as well as the hounds.

A second flask hit to her right, between two of the hounds. They leaped aside with yelps of despair. Smoke saw the opening, scooped up Jini in her arms, and ran for the woods where Ellina waited, poised to hurl another flask at any pursuit.

None came. The hellhound barked to his pack. With a snarl of pure malice for Ellina and Smoke, he and his companions melted into oily black smears, which thinned and vanished. Smoke was not reassured. Hellhounds were notoriously tenacious. They would return with the night.

Jini squirmed out of the demon's arms and flung herself into her mother's. Smoke bore their bawling for as long as she could before she said, "Well? Are you going to tell me what that was all about?"

Ellina smeared tears along her cheeks with the heel of her hand. "It means he's finally found us. Jini's father."

It took them the better part of the afternoon to get the girl calmed down. Ellina put the child to bed, where she finally dropped into a fitful sleep. Smoke remained by the window, alert for any physical or supernatural movement. With Jini still at last, she finally spoke. "You owe me a full explanation, Ellina."

Ellina sat beside the bed and stroked her daughter's hair. "Yes. I do."

It turned out to be a familiar story: a coven hungry for power, a naive novice witch, an occult ceremony, a demon, a child. The coven had wanted a tool; for some reason it never occurred to them the demon might also. When Jini, barely a year old, first used her powers, her father appeared to collect her. The coven resisted. While the demon was distracted in battling them, Ellina managed to rescue her daughter and escape.

"But you suspected he might try to track you," Smoke said. "So you learned a summoning spell —"

"From a northern sorcerer," Ellina admitted. "I thought I could —"

"Set one demon to guard against another. Clever. I never would have thought you capable." Smoke peered out the window. Nothing yet. "He will come, you can be sure of that. We rarely breed with each other; our offspring turn against us too often. Children gotten on humans are less powerful, and make far more tractable servants."

"Jini will be no demon's slave," Ellina

snapped. "Nor any man's either. I won't allow it. I'll kill us both before I'll let Mennorax take her —"

"What?" Her shock nearly shredded her human form. She willed herself solid with effort. "Mennorax? Lord Mennorax? Duke of the Seventh Circle?"

"I didn't know who he was, then," Ellina protested. "We only planned to summon a demon, it didn't matter which —"

Smoke blasted the hut's interior with a string of blistering words that made Ellina clap her hands to her ears in anguish. Jini whimpered in her sleep. "You expect me to guard your whelp against a lord of Hell?"

"You're a demon too," Ellina said weakly.

"A minor demon. We work on the mortal plane. We don't challenge the favored of the Pit." Smoke stalked from one side of the hut to the other. Her feet left charred tracks in the dirt. "Your coven never summoned Mennorax. He saw a chance to get a slave and took it. You only have one hope against him." It scraped her throat raw to say it, but she forced the words out. "You'll have to take Jini to a church. He won't be able to follow you onto holy ground."

Ellina cuddled her sleeping daughter. "She's demon spawn. As tainted as I am. The priests won't take us in."

"Of course they will." Smoke grinned crookedly. "I understand your Lord's more forgiving than mine." She glanced out the window. The sun was setting. "Hurry. We haven't much time."

They left the hut as twilight claimed the hilltop. Ellina carried Jini in her arms. Smoke carried Ellina on her back, in the form of a smoke-blue mare. The nearest church served a village several miles away. Smoke set out for it in a floating, tireless gallop, her senses alert for danger.

The hellhounds had tracked Jini this far. This time their master would be with them.

The land slid past like a horrible dream. At last Smoke spotted the church spire, a lance above the tree-tops. She winced at the sight but kept going. Just a little further, and she'd be free of them. "We're almost there," she told Ellina.

Scarcely had the words left her than the hellhounds burst out of the forest. They rushed to flank her, cut her off, turn her back. Smoke snarled a curse

under her breath, flattened her ears, and kept running.

The pack leader loomed before her. He rose up on his hind legs like a bear and roared at her to stop. The roar turned shrill when she charged straight at him. The hellhound dropped, and Smoke leaped, a prodigious jump no mortal horse could have performed. She soared over the hound's head and landed well beyond. Her neighing laugh rang out over the hound's howl of frustration. "Hellhound?" she taunted. "Hellpuppy! Go chase a rabbit, mighty hunter of slow, tiny souls!"

Ellina yanked at the demon's mane. "What are you doing? They'll kill us now!"

"Demons can't be killed," Smoke shot back without breaking stride. But they could be tricked and, with the right weapons, defeated.

Father of demons, this was going to hurt.

She ran. The pack flowed in her wake like a sable river, silent but for their grating pants. The leader's scarlet eyes promised Smoke's destruction. He would sink his fangs into her and tear her essence apart.

Let him dream of that, Smoke thought, as long as he followed. Think of her, and not of where they were.

She galloped into the churchyard. Her hooves hit consecrated ground and split with steamy crackles. She staggered and went to her knees. Ellina and Jini spilled from her back. The hounds gave tongue in fierce elation when they saw the prey go down.

The leader of the hellhounds leaped the low stone fence, hit holy soil, and popped like a sooty balloon.

Four more met with disincorporation before the remainder of the pack caught on and skidded to a stop outside the fence. They howled and bared their fangs at her, but none dared set a paw within the churchyard. Instead the three sat back on their haunches and bayed to announce their position.

Smoke's own form had all but dissolved. She gathered herself into a ball of blue fog and hastened back to less hallowed ground. The hounds snarled at her, but did not attempt challenge. They would let their master deal with her.

A moment later, their master appeared.

Ellina had regained her feet. Her arms encircled Jini, who clung to her mother's leg. Smoke noted the child

had no trouble standing unhurt on church land. "Not her father's daughter after all," she remarked. "You sure she's yours, Mennorax?"

The demon lord oozed forward, a giant noxious stain against the sky. Smoke planted her woman's form between him and the churchyard. The stain bent to peer down at her. "What's this little vapor I see before me?" he hissed.

"On this plane I'm called Smoke," she said. "I've been bound to guard the girl. Leave her be."

The stain formed a face, which gaped at her. Then the demon's laugh boomed forth, tearing a low cry from Ellina. "You minor demons and your mortal charges. You take yourselves so seriously." Before Smoke could move he detached a portion of his mass and swatted her aside. She hit the ground hard, yards away. The hellhounds chortled. It served her right, she thought, facing a lord of the Pit while still solid. She shoved herself up on her elbows and looked around.

Mennorax had forgotten her. His shadow form washed to the edge of the churchyard. It sizzled when it touched the holy ground. He flowed back hastily. This time his laughter had spikes in it. "You think the Church can save you? Think again. The girl is mine. Give her to me."

Ellina held her daughter close. "She isn't yours," she yelled at Mennorax, while Smoke thought, No, you fool! Run, don't confront him! "She'll never be yours. Leave us alone!"

Mennorax chuckled. His shape flowed into that of a youth, beautiful beyond human description. But his eyes, at least to Smoke's perception, still belonged to the Pit. He fixed those eyes upon Ellina now. "Do you remember, Ellina?" he crooned. "Remember when we created her. That pleasure can be yours again, if you will come to me."

Smoke saw Ellina shudder with disgust, with desire. Longing and loathing warred on her face as her foot slid the first step forward. Jini struggled in her mother's suddenly rigid grip, to no avail.

Smoke cursed under her breath. She thinned herself into a blue-gray ribbon. The tiny viper glided over the grass and stung Mennorax in the heel.

The demon's bellow wrung howls from the cringing hellhounds and startled Ellina from her trance. He

swiped at the viper with an eagle's claws, but his talons caught only smoke. Mennorax whirled on his quarry instead. Ellina was pounding toward the church, Jini in her arms.

Abandoning the human shape, Mennorax rose up in a great black wave. Hellfire lanced across the churchyard and engulfed Ellina's fleeing form. The woman fell without a sound, blasted to wet ash. Jini hit the ground with a thump and lay there, stunned, untouched by the demon's flame.

Out of Mennorax's immediate reach, Smoke dragged the remnants of her self back into her woman form. "Nice going, Mennorax. Now how do you propose to get her out?"

"She'll come. She has no choice." He shaped himself into another male form, huge, authoritative, commanding. He beckoned to Jini. "Come, child. Your place is with me."

Jini sat up. She bared milk teeth at Mennorax. Her eyes flamed like the deepest pit of Hell.

"Bad man," she pronounced. "Go 'way!"

Mennorax vanished abruptly, with a loud, sulfurous pop. His expression, glimpsed just before his disappearance, was one of profound astonishment.

No less astonished was Smoke. She stared at the spot he'd occupied, slack-jawed as any human. Strain as she would, no hint of him touched her senses. Wherever Jini had banished him to, it was far outside her reach.

The hellhounds looked at Smoke, then at Jini, then at the scorched grass where their master had stood. They tucked their tails and slunk into the shadows.

Smoke schooled her voice to normalcy and held out her hand. "Jini. Come."

The child ran at once to her guardian. She hid her face against Smoke's neck. Hot human tears slid along the demon's throat. "Want Mommy."

Hellfire, what now? With Ellina's death the bond was dissolved, Smoke's obligations ended. She was free at last, to leave the brat and go where she would.

Leave her to what? Life among the stupid, short-lived humans? Those bloodless, cloistered priests? Mennorax's eventual, inevitable, and no doubt furious return? None of those was a fitting fate for a half-demon girl, especially not one of such power.

In spite of herself, Smoke found her-

self grinning. Half demon. That made all the difference. Such a creature would need special training, special care. And was it not her duty to protect the child?

"That's enough of that," she said briskly, when Jini's sobs threatened to escalate into hysteria. Her slender fingers flicked away the tears. "This place isn't safe for either of us. We've got to go."

Jini sniffled. "Home?"

"No, not back there. They know it now. We'll find another place. One with flowers. You like flowers, don't you?" Hesitantly, the girl nodded. "We'll find you plenty of flowers, then. And as you get bigger, I'll teach you other tricks. Tricks I'll bet the bad man doesn't know."

But he'd learn. She had a feeling the arrogant Lord Mennorax would be learning a lot of hard lessons over the coming years.

This might turn out to be an enjoyable assignment after all.

She rose gracefully as a column of smoke, with Jini in her arms. The child snuggled trustingly in the demon's loving embrace.



P.E. CUNNINGHAM is the editor and head writer of a weekly advertising newspaper. She has previously sold stories to *F&SF* and is working on getting a novel (or two) published. She wishes to thank her technical advisor Laura Todd, and Laura's three children (none of whom, as far as they know, is demon spawn).

GEORGE BARR has been a professional artist since 1960 and has been one of *FANTASY Magazine's* favorite artists since our first issue (in fact, he's appeared in all but three of the issues). He has won a Hugo as Best Fan Artist and has been nominated in the Professional Artist category as well.

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Never Doubt a Sorcerer

by John Buentello

The woman came into the shop just a little past nine o'clock. I was busy translating a very old text when the bell above the door tinkled, signaling her arrival. I placed a finger on a line describing the proper mixing of a powdered eel poultice and looked up. She was the most beautiful woman who had come into my place in ages, which meant a very long time. Her eyes were the deep amber color of a fine wine. Her hair, blacker than a night without stars, fell in thick braids to her shoulders. Her mouth formed a pink bow that parted as she smiled in my direction.

The woman crossed the floor of the shop and headed for my counter. I watched her dodge around a large stuffed eagle balanced on the branch of a whitewood tree. As she neared the counter, I placed a strand of yellow hair in the book to mark my place and slid it on a shelf beneath the counter. The woman, whose name I already knew, placed her hands flat against the top of the sheet of glass separating us.

"This isn't some kind of joke, is it? You really are a sorcerer?" She spoke in a voice too low and guttural to be her own. I squinted, wishing I had my spectacles, and stared at her face. For a brief moment the beautifully rounded features shifted, and an angry mask sneered at me with a look of pure loathing.

"Would you do me a favor?" I asked. I reached under the counter and pulled

up a freshly picked bulb of bloodroot. I'd shaped it into a coin-sized lozenge and decorated it with blue, refreshing flavor crystals. "Would you taste this and see if it really freshens your breath?"

She frowned at me, and her mouth opened slightly. I flipped the lozenge between the open gate of her teeth and gently forced her chin upward. There was a crunching sound, and the woman blinked a few times. She thumped her chest and released an enormous burp. A blue and purple cloud seeped from between her lips as the djinn that had been inside her began spitting and choking on the bloodroot. I brought my hands together around the escaping creature, smacking it into nothingness.

"What was that all about?" the woman gasped. She swallowed the last of the root.

"Never mind, Allie." I reached under the counter again and brought up a can of air freshener. Djinn always leave a nasty smell when they're expelled.

"How did you know my name?" she said.

I shrugged. "It's printed on your clothes."

She looked at her blouse and down at her jeans. "It is not."

"It is on your underwear. My mother used to do that to me, too."

Allie's eyes widened an inch. "You are a sorcerer, aren't you?"

I was about to answer when I noticed

her left shoe twitch at the toe. As I watched, a thin, silvery hand slid out from the buckle and began groping its way toward her leg. I reached into my pocket and pulled out two aspirin. These I handed to my visitor, along with a glass of water that happened to be lying on the counter. "Here," I told her. "You might need these."

In the next instant I was leaping over the counter, vaulting with an agility I'd been saving up all week to use. I had my hiker's steel-toed boots on, and when I came down on her shoe, there was an audible crunch as I mashed the silver demon to death under the metal cap. Allie screamed and hopped away from me. She bumped into the stuffed eagle and almost knocked it over.

"What the hell are you doing?" she shouted. I picked up the glass of water and handed it to her. She rubbed her foot with one hand while she swallowed the aspirin and water with the other. "Is this how you treat your customers?" she spat at me.

"Depends," I said. I picked up a disposable lighter and set the flame against the wad of spit that had dropped to the floor. The water wight that was taking shape within it never got a chance to see the light of day. I wiped the stain with a cloth, then burned that, too.

"You are a weird person," Allie said. She hopped over to stand next to me and stared at the burning cloth. "You sure have a lot of strange habits."

"And you have an army of demons

infesting your body," I said. I hopped back over the counter and pointed to a chair in the corner. "Have a seat and tell me about it."

She walked over to the chair and prodded it suspiciously with her undamaged foot. Satisfied that it was not going to bite her, she sat. She looked at me and let out a great sigh.

"I'm a student. I'm doing grad work up at Chilion State."

I nodded. "Down the road several miles. A very nice campus."

"Uh-huh. Anyway, I'm majoring in sociology. I want to travel the world, see people, learn what keeps us all together and sets us apart. I want to know other cultures."

"You don't want a real job."

She blushed a little, and I readied myself for an onslaught of blood blights. Nothing happened.

"I'm in the last stages of researching my thesis," Allie was saying. "My subject is the effect of arcane beliefs on ancient and modern cultures in various societies."

"With an emphasis on magic, I gather."

"That was my stupid roommate's suggestion!" She crossed her arms across her chest and stuck out her bottom lip. I took that moment to retrieve a knife I had sharpened earlier in the afternoon. I took aim and hurled it straight at her. Allie screamed as the blade spun past her ear and buried itself in the back of the chair. The wood nymph that was just morphing a set of eyes and a mouthful of very nasty teeth cried out along with my customer as the dagger hit home. The chair threw Allie to the ground and fell into a heap of lumber.

"Will you please stop doing that!" Allie shouted at me.

"So you were researching magic. Who did you talk to?"

Allie picked herself up against the far side of the counter, leaving a safe distance between us. "I met a guy who knew tons about this stuff. His name was Ugawump."

I nodded. "Short for Ugawampa-wump. They're not human. They're ten cat-sized spirits who have poured themselves into a man-shape."

Allie stuck out her tongue. "That's disgusting."

"Their only purpose in life is to provide a portal for others like them to enter this world. Did he give you a tattoo?"

Allie's eyes grew wider. "You're good! It's on my left thigh. He said it would put me in touch with the spirit world. So what do we do? Burn it off? Bleach it out?"

I shook my head. "Then the spirits, sprites and such will be trapped inside you. They'd bloat you until you burst at the seams." I watched as she stuck out her tongue again. "They already

know where the portal is. We have to close it."

"How are you going to do that?" Allie's expression told me she was sure I had a plan. People like that scare me.

"Let's see what I have on Ugawump possession." I hauled out a thick, leatherbound book of arcane knowledge, section M through Z. As I was skipping through the U's, I asked Allie,



"How did you find my shop?"

"That was the strangest thing," she said. She leaned against the counter and blew a breath against the glass. I took a fly swatter that had been blessed by an ancient priest and smashed the hoar-beast flat as it was rising from the glass. Allie apologized and wiped the remains with her sleeve.

"I was in my apartment, feeling like I was in pretty deep trouble, when someone knocked on my door. A really strange-looking guy was standing in the hall. I think he had pigfeet."

"Cleft hooves," I said as I ran a finger down a page. Wrong book. I grabbed another and started over. "Go on."

"He handed me a business card. Your business card. Then he sniffed me all up and down. After that he disappeared."

I let my finger rest on an entry for Ugawump. "An underhound. I use them for advertising. They have a knack for sniffing out sorcery gone wrong. The money I spend on toasted oats is worth it."

She frowned. "Toasted oats?"

"Their favorite food, next to entrails. Let's see what we've got on your Ugawump."

She leaned over the counter and stared at the picture next to the entry I was fingering. "That's him!" she shouted. "That's the guy who gave me the tattoo!"

"A were-Ugawump," I told her. I'd been afraid of that. They're the worst kind of incarnation. Trying to get rid of one's handiwork is like trying to get fleas off a St. Bernard. "Says here the strength of the portal is determined by the shape of the tattoo." I shoved the book over to her and pointed to the passage. "Mind if I have a look?"

Allie's face turned a deep shade of crimson. She unbuckled her jeans and slid them to the floor. When I saw how she was shaped under the jeans, it was my turn to turn red. "Nice piece of work."

Allie reached down and hiked up her pants. "Excuse me?"

"I meant the tattoo." I left her to finish dressing and began to browse around the rows of shelves that lined the back wall of the shop. I had one of

the items I was looking for, a large club with nasty-looking spikes embedded in it. It took longer to find the other object I needed; a plastic gun with a suction cup projectile stuck into the barrel.

I took both items back to the counter. Laying the club down, I brought the gun up to eye level and took aim in Allie's direction. The suction dart went flying across the room, missing the



bridge of her nose by a hair. The dart hit something that was scrambling across the far wall and stuck fast.

"What was that?" Allie noticed the club and her mouth hung open slightly.

I pointed toward the dart on the wall. Allie and I watched as what was trapped beneath the dart's suction cup struggled to be free. "Your Ugawump was spying on us. I figured he'd be snooping around to see how things were going."

"How did you know he was here?" "When you came in the shop the bell above the sill tinkled. It only does that when something inhuman comes over the threshold uninvited." I put the gun

down and motioned for Allie to come closer. She edged a little nearer to me. "Don't worry," I told her. "It can't get loose. The shaft of the dart is made of iron. He'll keep still for as long as we need him to. Now will you please come over here? Or do you like the idea of being Grand Central Station for the underworld?"

Allie joined me at the counter. She reached out a hand to touch one of the rusted spikes on the club but I slapped her hand away. "That's for the ceremony. It's time to get rid of that tattoo."

She let out a long sigh and laughed. I liked the sound her voice made when she did that. "You had me worried," she told me. "What do we do now?"

"First we purify your body." I picked up a jar from the counter and tapped a small amount of green powder onto my palm. Taking a deep breath, I blew it straight at Allie's face. She coughed and hacked as the powder cloud enveloped her.

"Next," I said, "You must receive the blessings of a priest. Lean over here." She did as I asked and I gave her a long, moist kiss on the lips. When I drew away there was a smile on her face.

"Are you sure that was written in the book?"

"Never doubt a sorcerer," I said. I looked down at the book again. "Now we must extinguish the life energy that gives the portal its strength."

"Huh?" Allie leaned down and scanned the book. "What does that mean?"

At that moment I picked up the spiked club and brought it down once, twice, three times on her head. She folded slowly to the floor of the shop. I heard a scream of cursing coming from the opposite wall and walked up to where the dart was still stuck on the wall. With an audible pop I pulled it free.

A tiny slip of a man, one of the ten parts of the Ugawump, hopped to the floor and began running around in circles. It glared up at me through misshapen eyes and growled.

"How dare you murder the keeper of my portal!" It might have taken a bite out of my leg but I held the dart ready.

"It took me all year to find the right human!"

Ishrugged and walked back to Allie's body. "Looks pretty useless to me now."

"That's because you killed it!" the Ugawump snapped. It hopped over to the body and placed a knobby hand on her thigh. As I watched, the hand slipped through the fabric of her jeans and came out with the rose-shaped tattoo I'd seen earlier.

"Now I have to find a brand new receptacle," it said. "You don't play fair, Rasputin."

"The name is Ray," I said. I still had my hiking boots on, so I used them. The demon let out a high, piercing shriek as I booted him through the door. He turned and stuck his purple tongue out at me before he hit the street and disappeared.

I picked up Allie's body and brought her around the counter into the back of the shop. I had a cot back there and I laid her gently on it. Then I pulled up a chair to wait. After a few minutes she groaned and opened her eyes. I held up three fingers and asked, "How many?"

"Too many," she said. Her eyes cleared and she sat up. She pointed a slender finger at me and shouted, "You tried to kill me!"

I went back to the counter and picked up the club. Allie screamed and kept on screaming until I laid it in her hands. She hefted it a few times, then pressed her fingers against one of the spikes. It bent nearly in half.

"Rubber," I said. "I sell a lot of them during Halloween."

"I thought you were trying to kill me."

"The Ugawump had to believe you were dead before he would remove the portal. The powder I gave you was a sedative. The Ugawump thought I'd killed you, so he reclaimed his tattoo and left."

Allie nodded and rubbed the spot on her thigh where the tattoo had been. "Will he be back?"

"Not likely. He's lost too much energy trying to use you." I smiled. "At least he had good taste."

She blushed and pushed herself up from the cot. "Thanks. Now I can finish my thesis." A frown suddenly creased

her face. "But now I have no authority to consult."

I tried to look scholarly. "I've been told I have a certain expertise in that area."

Allie's smile came back in full bloom. "That's right! Would you let me do research on you, Mr.—" She laughed. "I don't even know your name."

"Rasputin. And I would be honored."

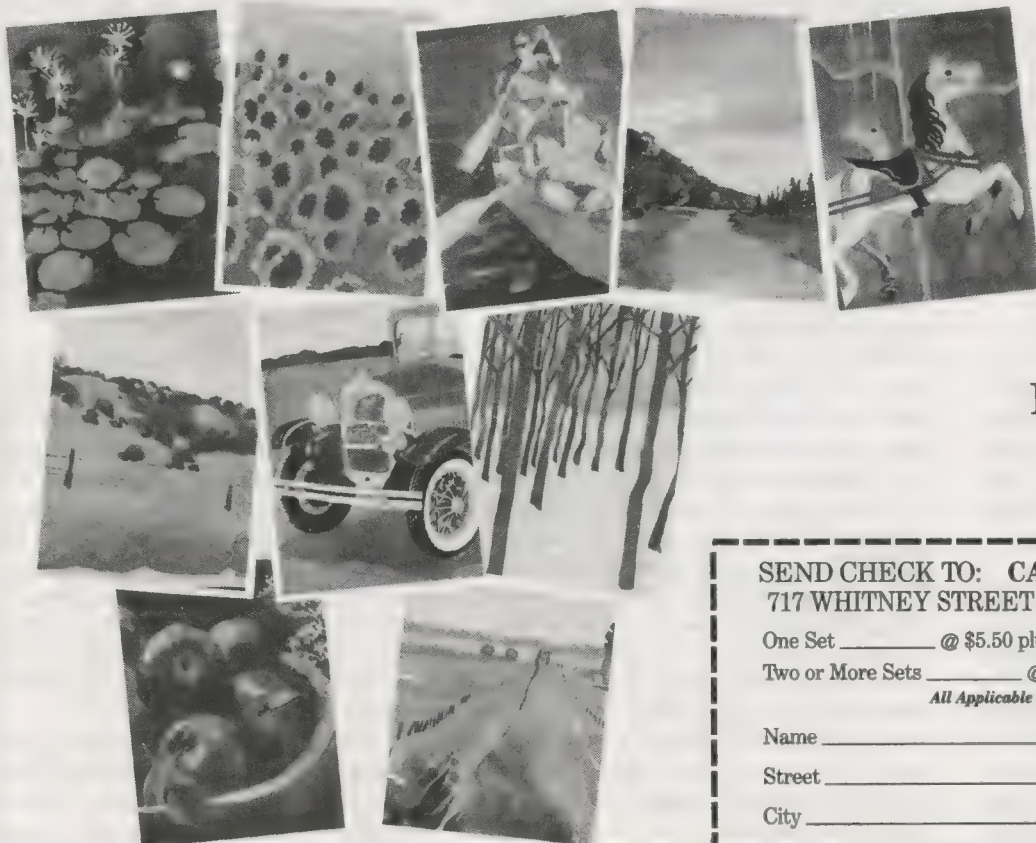
Her eyes narrowed for a moment as she stared at me. "Say, Raspy, exactly how old are you, anyway?"



JOHN BUENTELLO lives in San Antonio, Texas, and has had a number of stories published in the fantasy and horror field. John says his mother was the first person who taught him to believe in the fantastic, and everything else possible under the sun. He is currently at work on his first fantasy novel for children.

JULIA LAQUEMENT-KERR works mainly in comics, specializing in painting graphic novels. She prefers illustration work, though, from hard SF to the softest fantasy — dragons and sexy robots clash daily in her studio in Seattle, WA.

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My Girl

by Mike Resnick

Dear Sid: Sorry I haven't written for awhile, but a lot has been happening in my life lately. For one thing, I've changed jobs a couple of times. (Well, to be honest, I was *ordered* to change jobs. By my ex-bosses. Seems I keep oversleeping, which is something I never used to do. Let me tell you, buddy, middle age is a bitch.)

As you can see from the return address, I've moved into a new place. No pool or exercise room at this complex, but lately I've been too dragged out to swim or do the weights anyway, and the rent is half what I used to pay. The crazy thing is that in spite of leading a more sedentary life, I've managed to lose close to 30 pounds. You'd hardly recognize me these days.

Still, it's not all bad news. I've got a new girl. And *what* a girl! No more playing the field for *this* boy. I've found everything I ever wanted in one delicious French morsel. (Or maybe she's Belgian. Or Czech. Or even Russian. Who cares? All I know is that she's got an accent, and French sounds sexier, you know what I mean?)

Let me tell you about her, because she's changed my whole life. Her name is Michelle, and she's got the softest, whitest skin you've ever seen. We've got a lot in common, Michelle and me. I've always been a party animal, but I can't hold a candle to her. She seems to come alive at night, and she can keep going until five or six every morning.

(Remember Janni, the last girl I wrote you about? I thought we really had something there, but it turned out that she was an [ugh!] Morning Person. That's probably why it didn't last. Total incompatibility.)

For all that she loves nightlife, Michelle's strangely unsophisticated in ways, too. Like the first time I took her out to dinner: I'd been boning up so I could impress her with my knowledge of the wine list, and just as I'm deciding between a Cabernet and a Chardonnay, she tells me she doesn't drink...wine. (A European who doesn't drink wine? Who the hell ever heard of such a thing?)

So I offer to buy her a whiskey, or a Scotch, or even a beer, and it turns out she doesn't drink *anything*. I can't believe it, so I run down the list until I come to a Bloody Mary, and suddenly her eyes light up and she agrees to try one—but when it arrives she just looks at it, mutters something about tomato juice, and shoves it aside. (Well, at least she's not a lush like Judy. Remember Judy? The one who threw up all over the back seat of your Lincoln? By the way, did I ever send you a check to cover getting it shampooed?)

Anyway, this isn't to say that Michelle's not a lot of fun, or that she needs alcohol to overcome her inhibitions. In point of fact, she hasn't got any. Inhibitions, I mean. My back is covered with scratches, and while I don't

remember much about our romantic interludes — I still drink, even if she doesn't — let me tell you that this girl gives one dynamite hickey. I finally bought an Ascot to cover it, so I don't have to keep answering embarrassing questions at the office.

Still, when she needs to, she can also come up with those exquisite European manners. I took her over to Dick's house Tuesday night, and we visited Pat and Roger last weekend, and she refused to enter either place until they invited her in. I kind of like that. I'm sure the others wrote it off as shyness, but as I see it she was forcing the people around her to be just as well-mannered as she is — kind of like the way a good point guard makes all his teammates better.

By the way, have I mentioned yet that she's drop-dead gorgeous? Well, she is. You'd figure a girl who looks half as good as Michelle would have mirrors everywhere. I mean, hell, if I looked like Mel Gibson or Robert Redford, you can bet I'd never be far from one. But no one can say my Michelle is your typically vain female. Believe it or not, she hasn't got a mirror in her whole house. Not even in the bathroom. Now, is that old-fashioned modesty, or what?

Of course, nobody looks that good by accident, and she's really into watching her weight — and since we're spending so much time together, I seem



Artwork by Armand Cabrera

to be watching mine as well. That might be my only regret about the whole thing: no more Italian food. Every time I offer to take her down to Tony's for a pizza or some veal scallopini, she makes a face and tells me that the smell of garlic makes her sick.

Still, it's not a total loss. Believe it or not, I'm actually broadening my gastronomic horizons. Yeah, old conservative me. Michelle's put me onto some exotic European dishes: chocolate-covered ants and fried grasshoppers. (One night I teased her that all she eats are bugs. You know what she answered? "Worms are nice, too." Said it with a perfectly straight face, too. How many girls have a sense of humor like that?)

Finally, there's an aura of Mystery about her, just like all those heroines in the 1940's B movies. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I have a feeling there's a tragedy somewhere in her past, and I think it has to do with someone she loved getting drowned. At any rate, while she'll join or meet me in some of the grubbiest areas of town, I can't get her to walk on any of the bridges that cross the river. It's like someone she

knew must have fallen in once, and now she's got this subconscious fear of ever being over a body of water.

And I guess when you lose someone you care for, it makes you more compassionate toward the whole world in general. You want a crazy example? One night I hear bats flapping around in the eaves of her house, and I offer to call Joey Goldberg. (You remember little Joey, who used to be the water boy for the football team back in high school? Well, he's got his own company now. Exterminates every kind of pest short of I.R.S. auditors.) Anyway, she tells me bats have a right to live, too, and if I ever suggest killing one again, we're quits. How's that for a caring, 90's kind of girl? I mean, hell, she's so sensitive that we walk blocks out of our way just so we don't have to pass the Catholic cemetery over on Elm Street. I guess the sight of all those graves and crosses must depress her.

Well, I should probably close now and head off to bed. I'm getting a little pale — too much time in the office, I suppose — so I'm hitting the tanning parlor every morning before I go to

work. Hasn't done much good yet, but I suppose these things take time.

Your pal, Harvey

PS: Just out of curiosity, do you know if the FDA or anyone like that has ever looked into the tanning parlor business? There's probably no connection, but ever since I started going I seem to be so short of energy that I'm just dragging all the time.

PPS: Michelle called since I finished writing the last sentence. Says she's thirsty and wants to come over. Can you believe it? Three in the morning, and she's coming to my apartment for a drink. What a girl!



MIKE RESNICK is a prolific SF writer who often finds inspiration in his interest in Africa. This one is pure fantasy, though.

ARMAND CABRERA has been involved in sf and fantasy art since 1980. He worked for several years in the computer game field, at Lucas Films and Electronic Arts.

Gray Angel

The shriek came from somewhere ahead; past the bend in the road, hidden by the thick foliage of the forest. Netti spurred her horse forward, her healer's instincts overriding any thoughts of possible danger. Someone was hurt, that was all that mattered.

Her escort — two soldiers of the Baron's personal guard — overtook, and passed her before her small mare reached the bend. Jarek — one of the soldiers — ever mindful of his charge, slowed his big bay gelding to match the mare's gait, remaining a length ahead to protect her from whatever might await. Mikah raced ahead. Netti's heart pounded in rhythm with Cheya's hooves, her breath matching the repeated screams as they swung around the bend.

A small, black-haired woman knelt on the edge of the road, blood running thickly from a bad wound on her upper arm. A medium-built man with matted brown hair ran in circles, stumbling and screaming as he pounded his fists against his head. Though the man was obviously in pain, the woman's wound seemed the most urgent. Netti pulled Cheya's reins, grabbed her healer's sack and was halfway dismounted before the small gray mare had stopped. She

raced the few remaining yards toward the woman.

"Don't touch me!" the woman choked out, holding her right hand out in a warding gesture as Netti dropped to her knees beside her.

"You are hurt. I am a healer." Netti reached toward the woman's wound.

"NO!" The woman flinched back, beyond Netti's reach. When Netti did not press, she continued. "You must not touch me. I am *seyn trew*."

Netti sat back on her heels, brushed auburn hair from her face. A part of her mind registered that the soldiers had wrestled the screaming man to the ground. Mikah held his arms while Jarek tried to prevent him from banging his head on the ground. "I don't understand," she said. "Your arm is badly hurt. I am a healer. Let me tend it."

"You must *not* touch me. I am *seyn trew*." The woman shook her head. "In your words, it means something like 'see true'." Blood continued to flow from the woman's wound. It looked bad to Netti, although she couldn't see it clearly with the woman's bloody, torn shirt shielding it from sight. The way it bled though, Netti surmised it might have hit a vein, possibly had

damaged the muscles and nerves as well. The woman had dropped her hand and was gripping her wounded arm tightly below the gash. The color was quickly draining from her face. Already, she showed many of the early signs of shock and blood loss.

"I don't know what you mean, or why you don't want me to touch you," she said calmly, calling upon all her talents to focus on calming the woman. She noted that the man continued to struggle against the guards but that his screaming had subsided to sobs. "But if you don't let me take care of that cut," she gestured toward the woman's arm, ignoring the way the woman shied out of reach, "you will quickly bleed to death."

"Then tell me what I need to do," the woman whispered, her dark-gray eyes wide with pain and something else — apprehension, Netti wondered? "I cannot allow you to touch me, not now. I can't control it right now."

Netti didn't understand what the woman was talking about, but if she could at least get the bleeding controlled, it would be a start. There wasn't enough time to argue. If the woman passed out from blood loss, she might die. The healer took over.

by Lyn Nichols



Artwork by Dameron Willich

"Hold your arm above the wound," she instructed. "No, not there." Netti raised her own arm and allowed her belled sleeve to drop to her shoulder, exposing her entire arm. "Here." She indicated the major vein just below the armpit. "Put pressure there." The woman complied and Netti watched the wound critically to see if the blood flow slowed. Not much. She grabbed her sack and pulled a length of cord from it. "Can I loop this around your arm and tie it...if I don't touch you in the process?" she asked as the woman began to recoil. "You need a tourniquet to stop the bleeding." The woman nodded, but watched Netti warily.

Very carefully, Netti looped the cord under the woman's arm, twisted the ends into a slip-knot and pulled it tight. The woman gasped as the cord dug into her skin, but remained motionless. "Hold this," Netti held the long end of the cord out to the woman. "Keep as much pressure as you can on it."

Reaching into her sack, Netti pulled out a sharp knife, a piece of canvas, and the little pouch that held her sewing kit. Quickly, she spread the canvas between them, and laid the knife on it, then reached for the cord, again avoiding contact with the woman. "Take the knife. Cut the fabric away from the cut." One-handed, she opened the sewing kit and spread its contents on the canvas as the woman cut her sleeve away just below the cord. Weighted with blood, it slid down her arm. When the woman had finished, Netti gingerly grabbed a corner and pulled the blood-soaked fabric completely away. Glancing at the soldiers, she saw that the man now sat quietly, with Mikah standing nearby watching him. Jarek had picketed the horses and was approaching. "Jarek," Netti called to the older guard. "Come here, but don't touch the woman." She acknowledged the woman's wan smile and answered her unspoken question. "I need a few more hands here."

Jarek approached, towering over the two kneeling women. "Take the cord," Netti told him. "Keep it tight." Accustomed to working with Netti, Jarek knelt and took the cord. Her hands free, Netti fished out the gut string and a needle and quickly threaded it. "Can you sew yourself?" she asked the woman. The woman looked ashen, and shook her head. "Then you had better explain why I can't touch you, and quickly. You've lost too much blood

already, and if we keep that cord on too long, you'll lose the entire arm."

"I told you," the woman rasped out, obviously fighting off unconsciousness. "I am *seyn trew*. A true seer. If you touch me, all the truths of your soul will be known to me...and to you." She took a deep breath before continuing. "When he," she tipped her head toward the weeping man, "grabbed my arm and stabbed me, I was not prepared. He did not like what we saw."

Netti quickly thought through what the woman said. It was a frightening prospect. As a healer, she knew there were many things a person's mind hid from consciousness. "I'll have to take that risk," she said. "I must. That cut is very bad. It needs sewing, and more."

"I will try to hold it back," the woman whispered, her head sagging. "But I am very weak. I am sorry."

Steeling herself against what she anticipated as an ordeal, and calling all of her healer's talents to the fore, Netti grasped the woman's arm just below the wound. Terrible, alien thoughts suddenly swirled through her mind. A part of her registered Jarek holding her around the shoulder with his free arm, supporting her as she swayed, then the strange, reeling thoughts ebbed somewhat. She knew more of herself than she had ever realized, but she could focus.

She shrugged Jarek's arm off and began her work. As she examined the woman's wound, and began sewing up first the torn vein with small tight stitches, more and more things about herself swam through her mind. Memories, long forgotten, surfaced and then were replaced with others. Kindnesses and cruelties she had experienced, done, and thought were examined and laid aside.

She reached for another needle and piece of gut and the images vanished. Netti was shaken by the unusual onrush of memory and emotion, but the woman's arm was more important. She could examine her thoughts later. As she again made contact, to sew the muscle and skin, the parade of her life again began to march through her thoughts. Only her intense concentration on her healer's work kept them from claiming her full attention. Finally, she was finished. She released the woman's arm and ended the mental struggle, sagging against Jarek's supportive shoulder. She was more

exhausted than she could ever remember being. But she wasn't done, not yet.

"You can release the cord, Jarek," she said, forcing her eyes to stay open as he complied. Netti pushed herself up and, steeling herself for another assault upon her mind, helped the woman lie down. "How is the man?"

Before Jarek could form an answer, the woman said, "He has no physical wound. He simply saw what you did, about himself. He is not so nice a person as you." She sighed and closed her eyes. "He is a poor man and hungry, and hunger can make a man forget who he is. He will recover, but he will not forget. His truth is not so terrible as to drive him mad hiding from it." Opening her storm-colored eyes once more, she looked at Netti. "Thank you, Netansa," she whispered. "My name is Althansianja. Or Althan. I am honored to know you."

Netti was surprised at Althan's use of her given name. Very few people knew it. Then she remembered that what she had experienced, so had Althan. Then the rest of the sentence penetrated. "I am honored to know you," she had said. Netti felt certain Althan did not often say that. It was an intensely humbling thought. She could think of no reply that could possibly convey to Althan her feelings. Instead, she brushed a strand of Althan's hair from her forehead and said, "Sleep now," knowing Althan would know what she could not find the words for.

Althan closed her eyes and her breathing settled, but Netti noticed the small smile that lingered on her pale lips.

"She cannot come with us, Healer."

Mikah was adamant. He wanted nothing to do with Althan. Netti looked to where Althan still slept. Mikah would not go near the woman except when forced by duty. Moving her to this clearing just off the road, Netti had had to insist, almost order his compliance. In the end, Mikah had fetched a blanket, spread it near the unconscious woman and asked Netti to push her onto it. Only then would he help Jarek carry the woman. At least Jarek isn't being a complete fool, Netti thought uncharitably. Jarek had helped position Althan onto the blanket, but had been obviously shocked by the small contact and just as obviously relieved to end it.

"We can't leave her here." Netti was

just as adamant. "And I can't treat her as she needs while we camp in the woods."

"She's a Gray Angel!" Mikah almost shouted. His next sentence was quieter, but no less vehement. "She is a...she's unnatural!" Netti opened her mouth to retort, but Jarek spoke first.

"Healer?" he said quietly. "Why not send Mikah to Sintek for a cart and horse? The woman needs time to rest and regain strength, and cannot ride as she is now."

"No!" Mikah argued. "We are both charged with the Healer's protection. That includes protecting her from that...thing!" He pointed toward Althan.

"Mikah," Netti said, letting her tone convey her authority over both soldiers. "Jarek can protect me from anything I might need protection from. And I do *not* need protection from Althan. I have already touched her. She did me no harm. Please, do as Jarek suggested. Go to Sintek and get a cart.

"If, after we have returned to the Baron's keep, you wish to be relieved of duty as my escort, I will not argue." She smiled kindly at the superstitious guard, understanding his fear of Althan. "Nor will I suggest that your transfer is anything more than your desire to do something different."

Stiffly, Mikah bowed his head in acknowledgment of her request, if not her kindness. "Very well, Healer, I will fetch the cart. Sintek is at least eight leagues distant, though. I can be there tonight easily, but with a cart, it will take a full day, or more, to return." Netti nodded her concurrence with his estimate of distance and time. "And with your permission, Healer," he continued. "I will request from the garrison there that another return to you with the cart." He raised his eyes to meet Netti's, his concern and fear apparent in his brown eyes and weathered face. "I'm sorry, Healer. I have been honored to serve you this past year, but...I...you don't know..."

Netti touched Mikah's arm. He had been a faithful guard to her, and in some ways a friend. Though she didn't know him well, she knew he was from a small farming town in the far North, and the North hosted many beliefs and customs that were unfamiliar and strange to her, being from a land far to the South. If, in his beliefs, the *seyn trew* were considered dangerous or at least to be avoided, she would not attempt

to change his feelings.

"I understand, Mikah. Truly, I do." She squeezed his arm for a moment then released it. "I only ask one thing of you before you go." Mikah met her gaze, his sandy hair shading his eyes.

"And what would that be, Healer?"

"I ask for an oath."

"An oath?" He looked startled. "What oath?"

"That you will not speak of what you believe Althan to be. A...what was it

you called her?"

"A Gray Angel."

"Yes. I ask your oath that you will not speak to anyone of Althan being a Gray Angel." Netti paused for a moment, thinking. If Gray Angels were known in the North, but unknown in the Southern lands of her people, perhaps others would also have Mikah's fear. It would serve no one if Mikah's replacement had the same fears. "I will leave it to your judgment in selecting



your replacement, Mikah. Only, try to find someone who..."

"Healer," Jarek interrupted. "I am from the West, and we, too, have had some dealings with Gray Angels." He paused, running his fingers through his dark-blond hair. Netti nodded for him to continue. "We do not fear them as they do in the North; we honor them. May I suggest that Mikah choose a Westerner as his replacement?"

"Yes. Thank you, Jarek. It seems, be-

ing from the southern reaches of Madraen, I have much to learn of this cold, northern country of yours." Mikah looked relieved to have had this decision decided for him. "Will that suit you?" Netti asked.

"Yes, ma'am." Lapsing out of the formal role he had adopted, Mikah reached for her hand. "I'm sorry, Netti. I know it's probably foolish, but there are some things that you just can't change."

Netti smiled, then laughed ruefully.

"I know, Mikah. If I had had even half a clue what Althan meant when she told me why she didn't want me to touch her, I'd have been terrified. Now," she shrugged, "it wasn't so bad. Very different from anything I've ever experienced, but...well, not having any preconceived knowledge, I think, helped. A bit, maybe." She laughed again, and shook her head. "You'd better get on your way." Impulsively, she hugged Mikah, and was pleasantly surprised when he returned the pressure and kissed her forehead.

"Gods keep you, Healer," he said, then mounted his horse. With a quick salute, he urged it into a lope and disappeared amid the trees.

"Netansa."

Netti paused in checking her packs and glanced up. Althan stood just outside the door, her head lowered, her face hidden in a fall of midnight hair. "Come in, Althan," she invited with a smile.

"I have a request of you," Althan said as she entered the room. "I wish to ride with you when you leave tomorrow."

Netti sat on the edge of her bed, indicating Althan should join her. "Why, Althan? Your arm is nearly healed, as much healing as I can give it. You don't need me any longer. You can continue your own journey now."

Althan glanced at her useless left arm. The man's dagger had severed the nerves, as well as muscle. She shrugged. "I had no destination then. I have none now. I..." Althan stared at the wall and swallowed. For a long while, she said nothing, then: "I don't want to be alone anymore," she whispered. "I need a friend."

Netti was moved by the loneliness of Althan's words. Her duty to the Baron was to ride his lands, tending those ill or injured. The contract provided her with two guards, but said nothing about traveling companions. And yet, Mikah had feared Althan. Jarek, and Keeth — Mikah's replacement — treated her with deference, yet avoided direct, physical contact. "I don't know, Althan." Netti sighed. "I have duties, responsibilities. I must stop at villages and farms. Tend the sick or injured." She reached up and tucked a stray lock back into its braid.

"It is because I am *seyn trew*, isn't it?"

"No," Netti responded with more force than necessary. "Well, in a way,



Artwork by Dameron Willich

yes. You know Mikah, being from the North, feared you. Jarek and Keeth, Westerners, respect you. I must travel all through Baron Dupat's lands — what happens when someone I must treat..."

"You need not worry. My strength — and control — have returned. What happened when you touched me...I was frightened, hurt, and weakened. It was beyond my control. Now," she reached out and took Netti's hand. Netti tensed in anticipation. "You see?" Netti relaxed. No stray thoughts moved in her head. Althan's hand was merely a hand, small and cool, in her own.

"I'll still have to talk with Jarek and Keeth. They, too, have a voice in this."

"Yes." Althan rose. "Thank you again, Netansa. For my life. For your friendship." At the door she paused, turned back. "I will speak with Jarek and Keeth. They would agree if they thought you desired it. They will be more truthful with me." She grinned as Netti started, her gray eyes alight with wry humor. "And I won't even have to touch them!"

Netti shook her head, pushed a strand of her red hair from her face, and sighed. For a moment, she rested her hand on Armon's cheek, then sighing again, she pushed away from the bedside. There was nothing more she could do for him. The consumption was in its final stage and no longer responded to the medicines and herbs she tried. All she could do now was give him ephedra to ease his breathing and small doses of poppy to ease the pain — and she couldn't even give him enough of the poppy to really help for fear he wouldn't have the strength to draw breath.

"I'm sorry, Ceeli," she said to Armon's wife. "I don't know how much longer he'll live. I've done all I can."

Armon coughed and moaned. Ceeli's faded blue eyes filled with tears as she gently wiped the spittle and blood from her husband's lips. "He's hurtin' so," she whispered. "Can't ye at least give him more fer the pain?"

Netti looked away. The fire crackled and rustled in the hearth, a night bird called and called again, and Armon's breath rasped in and out of his chest. "I can't, Ceeli. If I give him more, he'll die."

"He's dying now."

"There's nothing more I can do, Ceeli." Netti crossed to the hearth and

snagged the kettle with the hearth-hook. *This is the worst part of being a healer*, she thought. *When there was no more healing to be done*. She poured herself some tea and told her mind to hush.

Netti stared into the fire. She didn't want to see the hurt in Ceeli's eyes. Armon gasped and coughed again. And then again. It was a deep, dry cough that was painful even to listen to. Ceeli's soft weeping hurt even more. Netti closed her green eyes for a moment and tried to close her heart as the coughing spasm continued. She finished her tea, gathered her herbs and pulled on her cloak. At last, with a choked wheeze, Armon's coughing abated, and his ragged breathing once more filled the corners and shadows of the room. At the door, ready to take her leave, she dared to look back. Ceeli was smoothing Armon's thinning, white hair from his forehead, her tears ignored as they dripped on the coverlet. Something inside Netti felt broken.

"Ceeli."

"We been wedded more'n forty year," she said, never taking her eyes from her husband's pain-wracked face. "Raised six childer, buried four others."

"Ceeli, I..."

"He was a good man. He never hit me, not even once. Only cuffed the boys when they served it. You should ha' seen him the day our Bess wedded that Calder boy. He were so proud." Ceeli smiled a sad smile at the memory. "And he got hisself so silly drunk on the marriage grog, the pastor had to get some o' the boys to carry him home..."

"Ceeli." This time more forcefully. Ceeli looked up. "I have to go now. Jani Danner is due to have her baby any time." Armon coughed and gasped. "I'll come back as soon as I can." She turned to the door, turned back once more. "Do you want me to send someone for Bess?"

Ceeli shook her head, brushed Armon's forehead once more. "No, but I thank ye, Healer. Armon's dying isn't something the childer should see, I'm thinkin'. They should keep the memories o' him laughin' and teasin'. No. They don't need to be seein' him like this."

Netti nodded, quietly closing the door behind her. She walked blindly through the darkness, knowing Jarek and Keeth would follow along, allowing her privacy. She needed to think.

She needed to put Armon's imminent death in its place. She needed...

"Netansa?" Althan's voice cut through her thoughts. Netti stopped, but did not turn. "Netansa. What is wrong?"

"Oh, Althan. It's..." unable to explain the tumble of emotion, frustration, and futility, Netti grabbed Althan's arm, then just as quickly let go. Althan's face showed complete understanding. Jarek and Keeth caught up with them and waited, silent.

"Netti, there is something about me you don't yet understand. I can do something for Armon."

Netti looked at Althan. What could this woman, this Gray Angel do, that she, a professional healer could not? Frustration made her voice sharp. "And what is that?"

"I can help him." Althan paused, rubbed her damaged left arm. "It's what I do."

"This is why we honor them," added Jarek.

"If you can help Armon, Althan, then do. Please."

Netti turned back to the little cottage with the dying old man and the grieving old woman. Without knocking, she pushed through the door. "Ceeli," she said as she entered. "Althan, my friend, says she can help Armon." She motioned Althan to enter.

Ceeli's faded eyes took in Althan's small stature, black hair, dark eyes. She nodded once, as if to herself. "You be a Gray Angel, then?"

Althan nodded and crossed to the bedside. "Do you wish me to help?" she asked. Ceeli looked at Netti, still standing in the doorway, then returned her eyes to Althan.

"Yes. Help him, if he'll have it."

Althan dropped to her knees beside the bed. For a moment, she only looked at Armon, listened to the wheeze and rack of his breathing. Then she nodded to herself and placed her right hand on his brow. Armon stiffened for a moment, then relaxed. Netti watched, quietly, from the doorway. Armon let out a deep sigh, then all was quiet. Althan dropped her hand to her lap. The fire crackled and hissed as a log split, the night birds continued to sing, and Ceeli's soft weeping was as gentle as wind. Althan rose to her feet and slipped out the door.

Suddenly Netti realized there was a sound missing. Armon's breath wasn't rasping and wheezing through the

room anymore. She couldn't hear it! Quickly, she crossed the small distance from door to bed, placed her hand on Armon's chest. Expectantly, she waited for it to rise, or fall. Nothing. She laid her fingers against his throat, then placed her ear against his chest listening for a heartbeat. Nothing.

"He's dead!" Netti said. "Dead." She whirled toward the door and chased after Althan. Althan waited with the horses and guards. "He's dead!" Netti repeated.

"Yes." Althan's gray eyes were dark with empathy.

"You said you could help him," Netti accused. "You killed him!"

"It was what he truly wanted. I helped him." Althan reached for Netti's hand. Netti snatched it away, barely brushing Althan's. "Oh, goddess of mercy," Althan breathed in sudden realization. "You didn't know..."

"Know what? That you would kill him?" Netti walked away, turned back suddenly. "I am a Healer. I save lives! I don't kill people." She paused, kicked at the ground. "I couldn't do anything more for Armon, but I would never have sanctioned killing him!"

"Netti," Althan said softly. "I did not kill Armon. He knew he was dying. He knew his pain was hurting Ceeli. He was tired. I merely showed him the way. I do not kill." She stepped closer to Netti. "If he had not wished to die, he would not have. He would have been as you left him, until the disease killed him."

"You had no right!" Netti turned her back and began walking, stiff with anger.

Jarek followed, dragging the horses. After several minutes, he caught up with her, matched her pace. "This is why we honor the Gray Angels," he said, almost as if speaking to himself. "A Gray Angel stops the suffering and eases the grief. His wife knew what Althan was; I heard her ask." Jarek stopped, Netti continued ahead. "Althan had both of their permission," he spoke only loud enough for her to hear him. "Who are you to deny them that?"

Netti continued walking. Her mind seethed with anger and confusion. She was angry, but not sure whether that anger was directed at herself or at Althan. She could do no more for Armon, she had said so. He was going to die anyway. But, still, as a Healer, she was sworn to preserve life; all life. She could just as easily have given too

much poppy, allowed him to die, allowed him to escape his pain. But she didn't have that right. Why, then, should Althan have that right? Was it because she could read the truth in someone? What if Armon had asked her to kill him? Did that give her the right? No. It wasn't right.

Looking up at the night sky, Netti noticed for the first time the thick clouds that had gathered and were threatening to occlude the moon. Rain would fall soon. She stopped, waiting for Jarek and the others to catch up. Without speaking, she took Cheya's reins and, hooking her healer's sack on the pommel, swung into the saddle. The little gray sidled, feeling her rider's distress. Netti controlled her easily, waiting for the others to mount, then gave the signal to ride.

Jarek moved to the fore, Keeth dropped to the rear, and the four rode in tense silence into the darkness toward the Danner house to bring a new life into the world. When they arrived, the first heavy drops of rain began to fall, raising puffs of dust and leaving darker smudges in the brown dirt. Netti finally addressed Althan. "When we get to Deering, I think we must part company," she said, then dismounted, tossing Cheya's reins to Keeth. "Keep her outside." It was obvious to both guards that she was not referring to the horse.

Netti pulled her cloak tighter against her neck and ducked her head against the steady rain and Althan's continued presence. She was thoroughly soaked, thoroughly miserable, and thoroughly disgusted. The trip from Kelgin hamlet — where Armon had died and Jani's daughter had been born — to Deering should have taken no more than two easy days riding. Instead, rain had turned the roads to thick mud that sucked at the horses' hooves and had slowed them considerably.

At least we will be there this evening, Netti thought as Cheya picked her way along the narrow, eroded trail that wound along the side of a steep hill. *Just another hour or two...if the road isn't completely washed out.* She examined the road ahead of her, noticing the runnels and furrows the rain had gouged in it. The outer edge had, in many places eroded away; washed down the side of the hill with the rain. Sludge and mud from higher up the hill had also contributed to making the road nearly im-

passable. Netti grimaced, tugging once again at her cloak and wiping damp red tendrils of her hair from her face. *At least tonight, we'll have a decent fire, and Althan will go her own way...*

Cheya plunged and bucked against the slipping earth beneath her hooves and Netti, startled out of her thoughts of warm fires, clung desperately to the saddle. The rains of the past four days had finally proved too much for this stretch of the road which had suddenly surrendered to the pressures of weight and rain. Jarek cried out and tried to reach for her and lost control of his own horse. Netti watched in numbed dismay as both tumbled down the hillside and were buried in sliding mud. Keeth's horse — a big, flighty bay — was having nothing to do with bravery or rescues. He spun, despite Keeth's determined sawing at his mouth, and fled back to firmer ground.

Cheya plunged again, heaving sideways. Netti slipped in the wet saddle, struggled to right herself. Cheya tilted, reared. Netti felt herself falling over backwards; knew Cheya was flipping over as well. Desperation lent her strength to throw herself clear of the little mare. She hit the ground hard, and a part of her wondered how mud could be solid. Cheya slid past her, still on her back, screaming in terror.

Netti tried to pick herself up, realized as her hands sank deep into mud, that she, too, was moving slowly down the slope. She looked up. Keeth had managed to control his horse. He fought the animal just beyond the edge of slipping earth, helpless, as he watched her. She felt a momentary pang of pity for the young guard. This was not something he could fight off with his sword. Beyond him, Althan stood, horror stark on her pale face. Her horse was gone, whether caught in the slide, or bolted, Netti couldn't guess.

Something large moved at the edge of her vision. She looked directly above her. A cascade of boulders, their earthly support gone, tumbled toward her in an awesome rush. She had only a moment to wonder at it before they crashed upon her. Then she knew no more.

"Netti?" A voice wound through the pain that coiled around her. She strained toward it. "Can you hear me, Netti?" Yes, she tried to answer, but heard only an odd gurgling. It hurt. Everything hurt. She wanted to sleep, but the voice kept intruding. Asking

things. Saying things. Mostly, she couldn't make out what the voice was saying. It was just a buzzing, an irritant that kept her from sleeping.

A sharp pain stabbed through her as someone touched her cheek. Netti gasped. Suddenly, she knew both her arms had been broken, one hand ripped off at the wrist. She knew they had applied a tourniquet. Her cheekbone and jaw were crushed, both of her eyes were gone. Her left leg was broken in at least three places. A part of her realized Althan was touching her, and it was her own knowledge, passed to Althan, that was assessing her wounds. The diagnosis continued. Her right thigh was broken, the jagged bone protruding through the skin. She would never walk again. She would never be able to talk normally. She would never see again. She would never be able to heal again. She had lost her right hand!

Then a question drifted through the haze of pain. *"Do you want to live?"* Did she? Did she want to live in this world of pain, knowing, if she survived it, her life would never be the

same? She knew the injuries she had were severe. She would always have pain. She also knew there was very little chance she would survive. She could live another few days, even weeks perhaps, but based on the damage visible to Althan's eyes, there were likely internal injuries as well. Or not. She could live years, broken and useless.

Another wrack of pain shot through her. Vaguely, she heard herself attempt to scream, and felt something warm and bubbling in her chest. She also heard Althan's voice telling someone to stop. Keeth. The agonizing pain continued. *"Do you want to live?"* What of Jarek, she wondered. *Does he live?*

"Yes. He is hurt, but will be fine. Only a broken arm." There was a pause, then, *"And you? Do you want to live?"*

No, she thought to herself and to Althan. *Not like this.*

She felt herself moving away from the darkness and pain toward a brightness she hadn't noticed before.

Wait, she thought. The sensation of movement stopped. Waited. *Althan*, she thought, willing the small, strange

woman to hear. *I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I didn't understand.*

"Do you want to live?"

Something awakened deep within her. A sense of wanting. Of need. The perception of light flickered at the edges of her consciousness, beckoning. Netti drew breath and shuddered from the pain. The wanting sensation grew rapidly, spreading to fill her, sharing space with the pain. She welcomed it. She welcomed the pain.

"Do you want to live?"

Yes. I do want to live. The wanting and the pain mingled and melted together as she felt Althan's hand withdraw.

LYN NICHOLS lives in a 50 year old house on five acres of "prime dirt" in Mojave, California, with her husband and three sons. She works at Edwards Air Force Base as a civilian wartime planner. She notes that, "I write because I have absolutely no aptitude for plumbing."

DAMEON WILlich lives in Seattle and has been active in the Northern Lights, an artists' group based there.

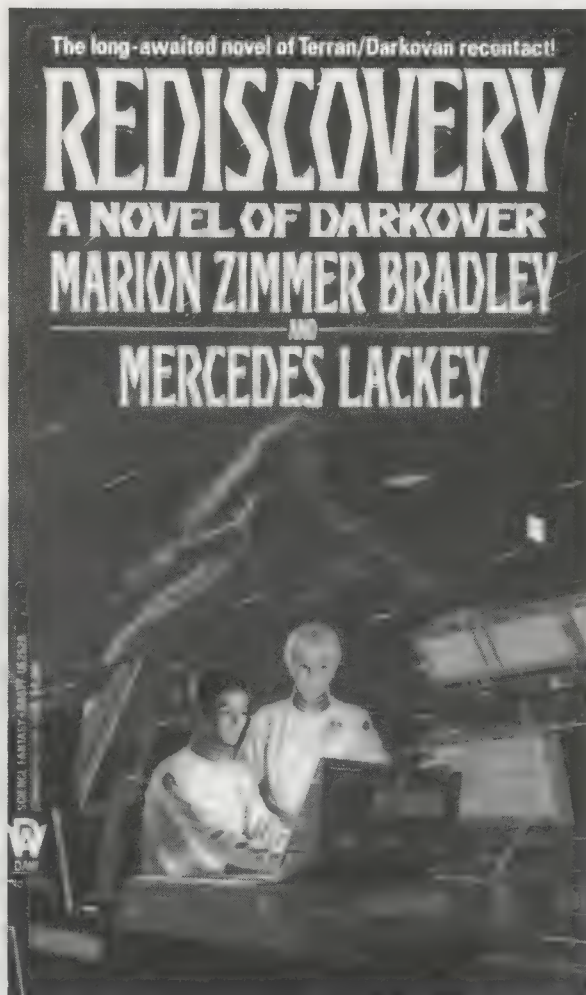


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Leonie Hastur, headstrong daughter of the Hastur Clan, most powerful of the telepathic families who rule Darkover, is being escorted by her twin brother Lorill to Dalreuth Tower for training in the use of her psychic powers. Although this is the event she has long dreamed of—for her *laran* is so strong that she has been able to use it without benefit of training or the need of a matrix crystal—and she yearns for the power which will come to her if she succeeds in becoming a Keeper, she is plagued by a terrifying premonition that haunts her day and night—the inescapable feeling that *something* is about to happen—something monumental and dangerous which will descend on her world and change it utterly. And all she knows for certain is that this *something* will be coming from one of Darkover's four moons.

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Letters to the Editor

OPENING LINES — REVISED

Michael D. Toman, Torrance, CA

I thought it might be a good idea to drop you a quick note to let you know that the opening line by Rafael Sabatini which you remembered [in "MZB Talks to Writers"] is indeed from his 1921 novel, *SCARAMOUCHE*. (It's even a little niftier than you remembered it: "He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad.")

THANKS! for your continuing work with the magazine and your entertaining and informative editorials.

And thank you for the details on that quote. — MZB

TOLKIEN VERSUS D&D

Steve Marsh, Wichita Falls, TX

Elizabeth Moon is one of my wife's favorite authors. Moon deals directly with good vs. evil and has strong characters that are inspiring. I was glad to pick up your fanzine for my wife just because Issue #22 had an interview with her. I was surprised that the interview talked about Tolkienesque roots to Moon's works rather than the Dungeons and Dragons elements. Tolkien is there only because of its influence on D&D—which shows up in Moon down to the magical horses and the various racial stereotypes.

It's an interesting theory, but are you really suggesting that the fact that role playing games have drawn heavily on sources such as Tolkien means that anyone who uses Tolkienesque elements must have gotten them through D&D? I don't presume to know what all of Elizabeth's inspirations were, but given the detail and care that she has put into researching such things as military logistics, I find it somewhat inconsistent to assume that she would base her society and characters on something as derivative as role playing games. It's usually fairly easy to spot the authors whose research has been done with dice in their hands.

And by the way, we aren't a "fanzine". That description is generally reserved for amateur (in the technical sense) publications. We have a paid staff and pay professional rates for our fiction and artwork. The correct term for us is "magazine". — HRJ

THE CRUELEST CRITICS

Greg Koster, Bremerton, WA

Mr. Shimel's ideas for promoting stories are fine. May I add one more? Your local library very likely will have story hours for children. The head of the children's department is likely as desperate for good storytellers as is the editor of any magazine. There is an added benefit: preparing your story for reading aloud will teach an author a good deal about storytelling, both spoken and written. Not for nothing did Mark Twain feel the need to write "How to Tell a Story", one of his better essays. Authors will also get direct, unvarnished feedback. I remember one of my classmates in library school taking great pains with the first story hour she was responsible for. The great day arrived, the story was read, and the first response came from an eight year old: "Boy, that was dumb." With the best will in the world, I had to agree, while noting that if I had said that, I would have been stretched out on the floor, spitting up teeth. She now does much better. If you can stand a "Boy, that was dumb" from the kids, rejection slips will seem trivial.

Vocal storytelling can certainly help point out the flaws in your work, but it is also a completely different skill from writing. Having a good story doesn't guarantee success in front of a live audience. (See this issue's "String Figures" on that subject.) — HRJ

A SAFE BUY

David McGinley, Harrisburg, PA
I've never been one to heap on com-

pliments. I always felt that my continued renewal made my approval plain enough. This year was especially hard on me, though, so I thought I'd tell you how wonderful your magazine is while I'm taking the time to renew. Marion is an excellent editor. I've always felt that any compilation edited by her is a "safe buy", meaning that it'll be sure to be worth the money in terms of reading enjoyment. She explains her editorial standards in the latest issue. Tell her not to lower those standards one bit. Ever!

We're also quite content to take renewals as a vote of confidence! — HRJ

THE POWER OF THE WORD

Gary K. Abraham, Baltimore, MD

When I was nine years old, someone gave me a collection of Edgar Allen Poe's short stories, and that gift changed my life. I discovered in that book the power of the word, and I was awed. I was awed by its power to sweep away what is, and replace it with what could be. I opened a doorway into a world of possibilities, it led me to Asimov, and Bradbury, and Baldwin, and Shakespeare. It led me to you. To the realization that the word can show us beyond our hates, or fears, or ignorances. That the word has the unique and beautiful ability to show us, as it entertains us, the ties that bind.

I have vivid memories of the librarian in Monterey, California, reading aloud from a novel called MR. BASS'S PLANETOID, when I was eight or nine, and of my frequent bicycle trips to comb the shelves there for Dr. Dolittle books and others. (In fact, my mother took me to task for reading so many fairy tales!) Of course, my mother had read to me all my life. I don't remember any single epiphany, just the constant knowledge that books and the stories in them were wonderful. Thanks for writing.

— REH



Marion Zimmer Bradley Talks to Writers: Dialogue

The other day I was on the phone with Parke Godwin, whose columns appear along with mine in this section, addressed to would-be writers amateur and professional. We were discussing possible future columns, and we happened to touch on the problem of creating believable dialogue.

Among other things I cited about the worst example I could think of offhand, though there must be worse lines — I read them every day in the slush pile — and if I'm sufficiently watchful, they never escape from it. This one struck me as especially egregious: A man falls off a horse under the eyes of the heroine.

Does he gasp out "Help!" which, I submit, is the most likely thing to say at that point?

No; he says, according to this would-be writer, evidently after pitching off his horse at her feet, without even an exclamation point, "Fair damsel, I am in sorry need of assistance." Read that over; is it likely that he would speak with such composure, make such a reasoned plea for aid?

Sorry; I just can't buy that. In fact, I *didn't* buy it; I reached for a handy rejection slip. I think I also wrote on it, "Dialogue not believable."

How do you avoid this all too common blunder? The answer is simplicity itself.

Read your dialogue aloud; see how it "plays".

Listen to dialogue — that is, to people talking. Then, when you read your dialogue aloud, ask yourself critically if it would be effective if you heard it on television, on the stage, on the radio, in the movies. This sounds simplistic, but there is really no other way to develop "meaningful dialogue".

I remember some story — maybe it was by William Faulkner — where a character is amazed to find out that he has been speaking in prose all his life. In the same way, if you listen to people talking you will discover that they are speaking in dialogue, very naturally.

Of course, people speaking off stage don't always speak grammatically, and often their language is not very literate or very complete. For example a conversation I heard yesterday went:

"Hi, did you—"

"Nah, I couldn't —"

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Can you —?"

"No, I can't help. You know I don't —"

"Oh, I forgot; this week you —"

And so on and on. This is a perfect example of how not to write dialogue. You know what you mean; your reader

doesn't. In fact your reader doesn't read your mind; he doesn't know what your characters are thinking until you tell him.

So *tell* him.



Writers Talk Back: But People Don't Talk that Way by Parke Godwin

"We'll hear a play tomorrow," Hamlet directs the players when they come to Elsinore. Until recently, British theatergoers spoke of going to hear a play where we would go to see one. To hear is more precise because hearing is the key.

Dialogue is people speaking and listening to each other, what the audience/reader "hears". The most reliable way to test the quality of your dialogue is to read it aloud. If it's awkward and stiff, it will sound that way. Since stage plays demand that dialogue carry the whole story, read stage plays, all you can find. Your local library has many texts and even recordings of plays. If you're sufficiently interested, you might also get involved in local theater and observe firsthand how dialogue defines character and advances the story.

"But people don't talk that way."

Oh? What way? People don't talk like Hamlet, Oedipus, or Cyrano, but these splendid works show no sign of fading into neglect. In this discussion of dialogue, we'll deal with different styles of speech appropriate to their setting, so we should differentiate between four basic kinds of dialogue: Naturalistic, Realistic, Heightened Realism, and Lyrical or Larger Than Life.

NATURALISTIC dialogue recreates the way people "really" talk in their own element. A classic example, now a cliché, is Brando and Steiger in *ON THE WATERFRONT* —

"Remember that night in the garden you come down to my dressing room and said, 'Kid, this ain't your night. We're goin' for the price on Wilson.' Not my night! I could take Wilson apart...you don't understand, Charley. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum which is what I am, let's face it."

Or Charity Stovall in *WAITING FOR THE GALACTIC BUS* —

"Come on, Woody, be real. You'll find someone else 'n have kids and a whole life to live. And when I see you again, if I ever do, there'll be so much you lived that you can't share with me, and it's so damn, rotten unfair — and here I am putting my heart out for you to walk on and what the hell are you laughing at?"

In good naturalistic or "kitchen sink" dialogue you have the sense of people speaking informally as they do every day, but art cannot completely imitate life and remain art. There must be organization and structure, and it must move. Most real conversations ramble and digress all over the place, whereas written dialogue has to stay on track and build toward the climax. Which means you'll likely end up cutting and revising much of your draft efforts, as I invariably do.

The advantage of good naturalistic dialogue is that it moves like a shot, bears no traces of the sweat you put into its kinetic movement, and, in an extended passage of short lines, looks attractive on the page because of more white space. Also your characters, not the author, are telling the story. The danger of such extended passages of pure dialogue is that the reader can become confused as to who's saying what. You need to add regular indications of the speaker — unless obvious — like he said/she said, or even better, a short line of narrative action to clarity —

"Look, I'm tired of this." Bill crushed out his cigarette too hard. "Enough, okay?"

One of my own major complaints in naturalistic dialogue, one from which so many urban action films/books never recover, is excessive profanity and obscenity. Young writers may be seduced into thinking this is a quick way to sound tough, street smart or sophisticated. Actually, when used too much it's a lazy copout. People don't talk that way all the time, not grownups at any rate. In excess it no longer shocks or frightens the horses, merely annoys and bores. By this I don't mean that pungent language has no place in this context; rather that, like vinegar in a good salad or an explicit sex scene, less is more. An ounce of suggestion is worth a pound of explicit. Whenever I encounter this overkill in verbal grime, I yearn to ask the writer why he/she didn't work harder to come up with lines that actually said something, moved the plot forward.

REALISTIC dialogue is close to naturalistic, but, while appearing deceptively natural, is actually more organized. Most American plays and fiction carry their dialogue in this style. Good classic examples are Arthur Miller's *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* and Eugene O'Neill's *LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT*. I might also cite Paddy Chayefsky's Oscar-winning screenplay for *NETWORK* and William Goldman's sparkling tongue-in-cheek dialogue for *BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID* or *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*.

The pitfall in realistic is to be so formally organized in syntax that you sound flat and lose the sense of people actually conversing. Again — read your stuff aloud and trust

your ear before your grammar.

HEIGHTENED REALISM. Here we move into a style more suited to fantasy and/or satire. Ever since studying the works of Anouilh, Shaw and Dylan Thomas, I've had a love for HR as a conveyance for wit and dash, because it's realism with music and the lights turned up high. The emphasis is on sparkle and concision. Not quite realistic but far more effervescent. As Arthur says of Guenevere in *CAMELOT* —

"Merlin, Merlin — why is Jenny in that castle? How did we come to this agonizing absurdity? Where did I stumble? Where did I go wrong? Should I not have loved her? Then I should not have been born."

Or Eleanor of Aquitaine to her sons in *THE LION IN WINTER* —

"Good, good Louis. If I'd managed sons for him instead of all those little girls, I'd still be stuck with being Queen of France and we should not have known each other. Such, my angels, is the role of sex in history."

In HR you're going a little beyond reality, slightly larger than life. The dangers here are inconsistency of style or (O subtle one, O serpent!) falling in love with your language for its own sake. The language works for the story, not the other way around. In HR let your language out to the length of your imagination but carry a large blue pencil. Remember, I mentioned concision. In HR you have always a clarity and economy of expression toward definition of character and plot movement. Good examples abound, but Gwynhwyfar in Bradshaw's *IN WINTER'S SHADOW* comes to mind —

"Not only is it all lost, it was we who lost it, we who by our own stupidity and weakness allowed ourselves to be divided and break, like a pot flawed in the firing that spills everything put into it."

From the autumn of a woman's life, richly autumnal in feeling and cadence, but far more concise than naturalistic flow of thought. Yes, it's an artificial device, but boy, does it work!

POETIC (or) LARGER THAN LIFE. What's true of HR is even more important here. To be believable, dialogue in any style must reflect human truth. In lyrical or LTL, you are portraying truth in a big way, but there are difficulties. People will accept a poetic convention of speech much more readily onstage than on the page, so you have to be totally secure in your style, ear, cadence, and language choices. And write this down in large letters, put it on the wall in front of your typewriter or word processor. HIGH LANGUAGE DOES NOT MEAN HIGHFLOWN — which is what you achieve when words for their own "poetic" effect fly beyond the emotional truth they are charged to convey. When this happens, the reader becomes conscious of reading words rather than being borne along on them. When I glean this impression from an author, his/her work gets tossed with no regrets. About three years ago a fellow who shall be nameless published (with considerable fanfare) an Arthurian work, the title of which blessedly escapes me. His "archaic" style was so opaque that I surrendered after five pages. Style should invite, not dare, you to read it. Other pet hates of mine were the incredibly stilted prose/dialogue of Talbot Mundy and the more effulgent passages of Lovecraft. By the same token I think my own book *THE LAST RAINBOW* suffered from a bad choice of dialect which made it occasionally hard to read. I have since learned and I hope Nameless above has as well.

In LTL you can take the language as high as the supporting

emotion is real. This is not and never will be easy, balancing a high style with emotional truth. I've never had more problems in this context than with my current project, **THE TOWER OF BEOWULF**, a novelization of the old Anglo-Saxon poem.

Sigyn and her son Grendel are huge, hideous monsters but through the compassion of Sigyn's father, the demigod Loki, there is a spell over them. Sigyn sees herself and her world as beautiful and secure (like all protected children) until she begins to mature. Knowing the truth, she shields Grendel from it as long as she can. When Thor pierces Grendel with lightning (awareness) the son confronts their true appearance with horror.

This crucial scene was rewritten three times. The first was too bland and philosophical. In the second Grendel's bewildered rage came out but Sigyn was still too distanced. I went back to basics. What was the truth here? A mother's instinct to protect her child even through illusion. The boy feeling betrayed, venting his rage on her while she in this pathetic, bitter moment, offers what she can: understanding, love, and even a little food.

Simple? Sure, but simplicity is the hardest of all qualities to achieve in the expression of emotional truth, perhaps the

signal difference between intellect and wisdom. Intellect proceeds from the simple to the complex, wisdom from the complex to the profoundly simple. In emotional writing, save your intellect for the polishing; first work from the gut. I'd been keeping myself at arm's length from the scene. Sigyn expresses two things in this scene, a boundless love and pity for her child, and her own acceptance, however embittered, of their fate. When the right words came, they had (finally, I hope) the full truth behind them—

"We are (men's) nightmares. If there were more of us than them, perhaps they would be ours...Loki was not unkind. He gave me a little beauty for a little time. Shild gave me you. I did try. I would try now. Oh, Grendel, I would be beautiful for you if I could. I would have all women and all worlds fair for you — and for myself, whilst the wishing. But I am a god's get in the body of a beast. Pity, but can Hrothgar or his kind say more? I am sorry the colors faded. Deal with what you are, my son. Eat the goat."

Yet...ever the old Philistine refrain of generations raised on movies and television: "But people don't talk that way."

The h— they don't. They talk believably any way your style dictates, so long as it rings with emotional truth.



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Tom

by Roberta Gellis

I never buy art. My family is full of artists and I can get all the paintings in any style I want. But all the walls of my house are covered with bookcases, so there's no room to hang art anyway. I love it, you understand. I always go to the art show at every con I attend. I look. I admire. But I never buy.

Until I saw the cat. An ugly, ragged Tom, the commonest kind of grey-striped tabby, sitting in the rain. I've seen cats in the rain. They are pathetic or stoic in their misery, seeking whatever shelter they can find and huddling in on themselves when there is no shelter. Not this one. He sat squarely in the open, and such fury leapt out of his yellow-green eyes that I knew he blamed me, me personally, for every drop that struck him.

I shrugged and turned away. Me, yes, but every other me that looked at that painting. The funny thing was that I was laughing as I walked to the next exhibit. I felt guilty for not letting the beast in — in from where to where I couldn't imagine — but compared to Tom's troubles mine were nothing. Before I had covered half the rest of the exhibits I was back in front of that damned Tom, and I looked at the little white sheet tacked alongside for the names of bidders. Then I shook my head. I never bought art, but somehow my pen was in my hand and I was writing my name and a higher bid than the single one already on the sheet.

Trouble caught up with me. I had to leave the con early and I forgot Tom, but about a month later I got a somewhat irate letter from

the Art Director of the con reminding me of my bid and telling me to send a check. I was annoyed myself — at making the bid, at the tone of the letter, at the fact that the shipping charges were almost equal to the bid I had made. Still, I wrote the check and mailed it, and when Tom didn't arrive after a couple of weeks, I felt really worried. It wasn't the money; the whole sum didn't amount to a hill of beans. Nonetheless, I put aside my work and wrote my own rather irate letter asking what had happened to him.

Of course it was pouring the day he

arrived. The UPS man had left the package against the door. I knocked it over when I went out to get it and got thoroughly soaked and then I tripped over the watering pot I had put down when the doorbell rang and soaked the rug too. By the time I had cleaned up the mess and got the package open — it was wrapped in enough layers and with enough tape to secure Fort Knox — I was boiling mad. But when the covers came off and my eyes met Tom's, I burst out laughing and everything was all right.

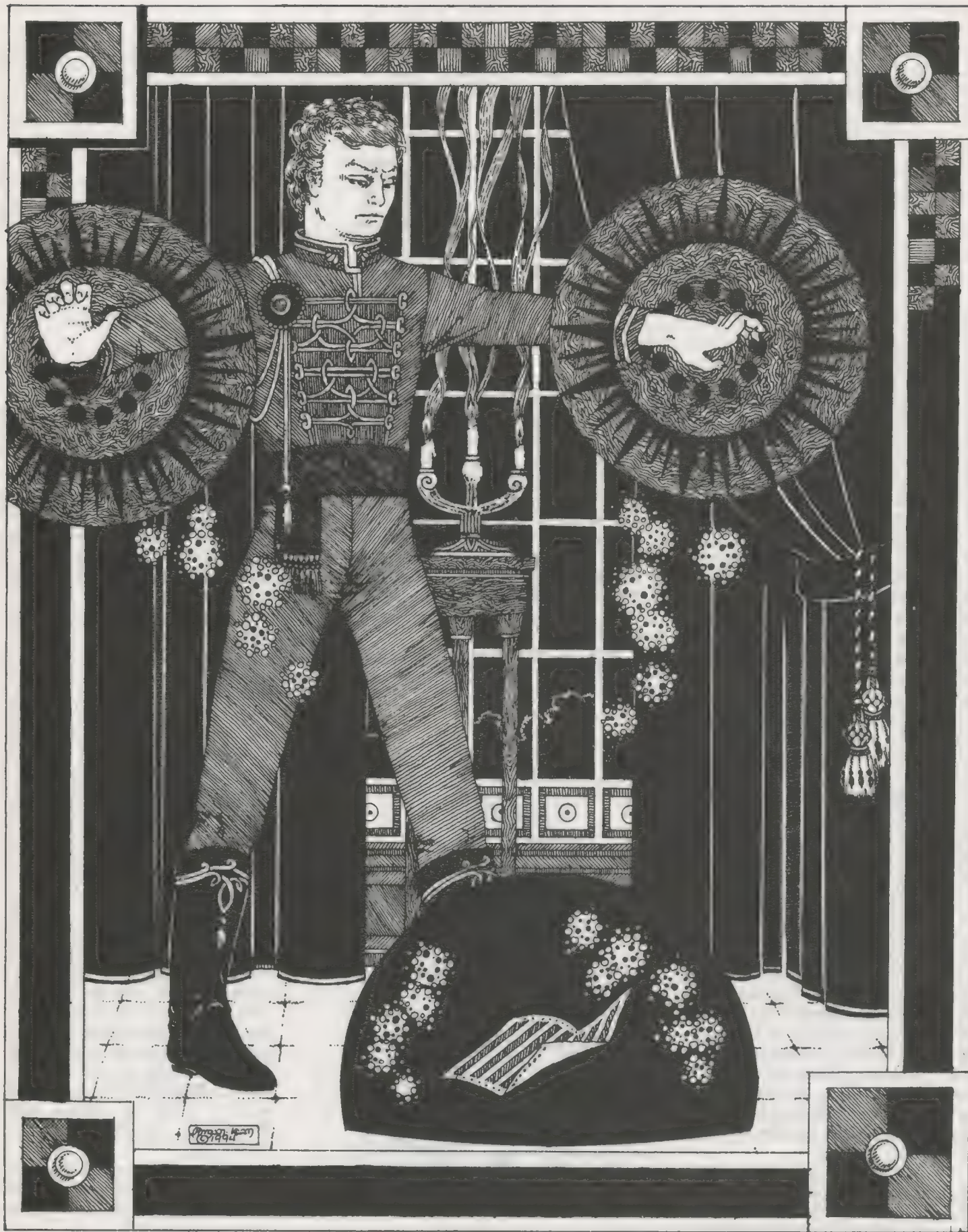
He sits on top of my computer now, very elegantly framed — but inside the frame it's still raining. Every time I raise my eyes I see him, and every time I smile and feel better. But I know this isn't the end of it. Somewhere, sometime, am I going to spend eternity finding Tom and letting him in from wherever he is to wherever I am? I just looked up at him again, and laughed, but I wish I could let him in right now.



ROBERTA GELLIS is a prolific writer of historical fiction, with occasional forays into suspense, science fiction, and fantasy. She lives on Long Island with her husband (whom she proudly notes she has been married to for 47 years). Her most recent project is **DAZZLING BRIGHTNESS**, a retelling of the myth of Hades and Persephone, and will be out in June of this year.

MARGUERITE RUTKOWSKI is an East Coast artist. In this case the picture inspired the story, rather than the other way around.





Artwork by Margaret Organ-Keane

An Equitable Division

by Janice Combs

The young man before me wore the sort of uniform one sees on the soldiers' chorus in comic operas, all frogging and braid. He asked, "Are you all right, Mistress Foresby?"

"No, I'm not." Neither all right, nor Foresby. However, I didn't intend to argue with him. For some reason I was standing in about a foot of water. I had no inkling of how I had got there.

He held out his hand to help me from the wide, round basin, in the center of which a triton blew water from a conch shell, the whole surrounded by a flagstone paving. Once out, I set my lunch hour reading, a trade paperback *KING LEAR*, on my briefcase while I dumped water from my shoes.

I needed information if I were to get back to where I should be — not this little moonlit park, but across from old Union Station in Kansas City, Missouri, at high noon. "Tell me what you saw."

"Ma'am?"

"Pretend I wasn't here, pretend that you are telling me something that I never saw. What did you see?"

"Well, you were doing a spell."

"What sort of spell?"

"You said it would tell us what I must know for the test."

I wanted to ask "What test?" Instead, I indicated the open area in the woods around the fountain, "Here?"

He pointed toward a gravel path that meandered up the hill before us; rather, he pointed in that direction and up. If I were still in Kansas City, he would

have been pointing to the left of Crown Center, toward my shop. "No, in the library — your library, not the palace library. You drew up the three circles and said the spell. Then I saw...it's hard to describe. It was like seeing the world through one of the stained glass windows in church. You can see the picture, but you can see the grass and trees outside, except this was like several stained glass windows on top of one another."

"Can you describe each scene separately, or was it just a jumble?"

"One scene was the library, and another out in the public garden, here. One was a big fountain at the foot of a bluff. I turned about, and, in that scene, there was a broad paving with carriages without horses moving over it and a palace across the way." — Which described where I had been standing before I was here, wherever here was, if one had never seen automobiles or a train station — "The other scene was a room with several chairs that didn't look very comfortable and a desk with several boxes on it; behind the desk, a long, low cabinet with a picture of a blue mountain above it. By the opposite wall, when I turned, another desk and a woman dressed in green. I saw books everywhere." — My office and my business partner, Nancy, who had ordered lunch in that day — "Then we were out in the garden."

"Did you hear a splash?" He hadn't, which confirmed that I had not dropped

into the basin, merely appeared. I offered him the last bite of the suburban tamale on which I was lunching; he wisely declined. I wiped my hands, stowed the paper residue of lunch in my hip pack, grabbed my things and started up the path; he followed.

I said, "All right, let's start at a different point. Let's pretend I have amnesia."

"Am — what?" He had come abreast of me, so that I could see the curiosity in his face by the leaf-dappled moonlight.

"Amnesia: loss of memory. I seem to have mislaid some of mine; so, you tell me who I am."

"You're Mistress Foresby, of course."

Asked to expand his simple declaration, he explained that I was his governess, Brunhilde Foresby, his nurse, and still his teacher long after his brothers had gone to other tutors. He was Rupert, seventeen years old; the youngest of three sons of Carl, King of Navorant, which was a Paraguay-sized country in the center of a continent the size of Europe, from the dimensions he described.

I asked, then, about the test. He said that his father had decided not to give the whole realm to his eldest son, but to divide his land according to how each son passed an upcoming test. Foresby wanted to get some inkling of the sort of test the young prince must undergo for his share of the land — thus, the

spell.

"Do you think your father is in imminent danger of dying?"

He thought about this. "No, he's healthy."

"Do you want to be king, my lord?" I hoped that was the proper term of address; I didn't want to antagonize a potential ally so soon.

He thought even longer about my second question. "You never asked me before. I don't particularly care to be

king, nor do I want the responsibility of the land as yet."

"So, what do you want?"

"To be a wizard, like you."

"Have we ever discussed what talents or attributes a person must have to become a wizard?"

"Not really — although, I think you wouldn't have me read so much magical theory if you didn't think it worth my time."

"Read a bit of this for me." I handed

him *KING LEAR*; my partner would ask if he could read English as well as he spoke it when, if, I got back.

"It's awfully dark."

I got my penlight out of the briefcase. The tiny spot of light greatly impressed Rupert. He read, "'Good my lord, You have begot me, bred me. . .,'" Cordelia's speech telling her father that she loves him, but not more than is possible. He read to the end of the page. "Is this the fruit of your spell? Is this what will help me with the test my father is to set for me?"

"I don't know. You see, I'm not really Mistress Foresby. I'm Teresa McKeon, from another world — a book seller, not a wizard. If you take me to Mistress Foresby, perhaps she can answer your questions, and I can get back home."

He considered my statement. "No amnesia?"

"I'm sorry; I wanted to know about you — why you called me by another's name — before I let you know about me."

"I've read about such things. It's supposed to be dangerous, or at least bad luck, to meet one's double."

He started off again, picking up the pace. We walked, without speaking, up to and through a small door into the substantial fortress on the hill; we traversed several courtyards, rooms and corridors, and climbed a winding stairway. I was out of breath by the time we stopped; it had taken nearly forty minutes to walk, all at too brisk a pace for me.

Rupert pounded on the door before us, calling for Mistress Foresby. There was no answer.

I asked, "Is it locked?"

He tried the door; it opened readily into an unoccupied sitting room lit by one taper. Rupert went in, but I superstitiously held back, thinking that to cross an unknown wizard's threshold uninvited would probably be foolish. He took the taper to look through the inner door. "She's not here."

"That's obvious. Was this where she did the spell?"

"No, the library, upstairs. I have a feeling that she's not there, either."

"Then, you'd better show me Mistress Foresby's library. If you can't find her, I think that we should try to recreate the spell."

Logically, I was in Navorant by means of a spell, so I would have to leave the same way. My counterpart in this world was a magician; perhaps I



could effect the same spell. As that seemed unlikely to me, maybe Prince Rupert had magical talent to send me back to my world and to bring Foresby back — he had certainly hinted at it.

Rupert closed the sitting room door behind him and mounted the stairs two at a time; he opened the library door carefully. We looked in; several candelabra about the perimeter provided light to the deserted room. Most of the candles were within an inch of guttering. Three concentric chalk rings in the center of the stone floor delineated the spell area.

The prince approached them gingerly, as though some monster lurked there, and slowly held out his hands. "The work is still here. I mean, I can feel that it hasn't been dispersed. If Mistress Foresby were still...in Navorant, I think she would have undone the circles to come look for me."

"One would hope. Can you undo the circles?"

"Mistress Foresby always said she sensed power in me. Perhaps I can, if I can find the proper spells." He went to a book lying on the floor by the circles.

"I've read theory under her direction, as I said, but never attempted any spells. My father isn't certain that he wants me to practice." He added that Foresby had kept him ignorant of her true wizardry on purpose, that his father and his brother's tutors might not accuse her of perverting him to dark purposes. I have always thought that ignorance never saved anyone from harm, but I have never had to raise a child, either.

"Sounds like she may be setting her own test for you. Are you willing to try getting your tutor back?"

"Can't Mistress Foresby perform magic in your world?"

"I don't know. Although there are occasional reports of spell working, they never come to anything. I've never heard of any true magic in my world. Further, I don't know that I could perform magic here."

"Sit down here and concentrate on this candle." He led me through the exercise that Foresby had used to test him and his brothers for magical talent. The results were inconclusive.

Rupert said, "I think I should play the wizard, then. Mistress Foresby left the book here on the floor, close enough to the circles for me to read from inside. It's as though she wanted me to undo the circles myself."

As if, I thought, she realized that she would not be back immediately. It wouldn't be politically wise to imprison a prince in a wizardly circle.

The book lay open to the spell that would undo the circles. A slip of leather toward the front of the book marked the spell that, according to Rupert, Mistress Foresby had used to bring me to Navorant.

Rupert thought he should first send a message to Kansas City, to see if he were capable of the work. Therefore, he wrote to Foresby, explaining our attempt. I added a note asking Nancy to provide whatever Foresby needed until I got back.

Rupert brought some instruments from a closet. He read from the book as he cut the outer circle with a wooden knife. He told me where to stand between the circles before he closed the outer and opened the inner circles. I placed the letter in the center at his direction. He closed the inner circles and said the translation spell.

I saw the parchment of our note replaced by a piece of green striped computer paper. I made some exclamation. Rupert's eyes were closed; his breath was a quiet snort as though he had been holding his breath. "Is it gone?"

"Yes, and we have an answer." I could read the computer printed note from where I stood.

"My dear Rupert:

"If this disappears from where I am, I will know that you are trying to bring me back to Navorant. I pray you are ready for the work and commend your essay. Do not attempt another spelling until you have read Chapter Seven of the Kavastia. You must rest and fast for a day before you can succeed in the greater spell. I have a friend here who sends a time piece. You will start when 'THU 28 10:00 PM' shows in the little window. Above all, get some sleep. I hope to see you soon.

"Brunhilde Foresby"

Rupert, awed, said, "She always told me that the Kavastia was too advanced."

"You never tried to do a spell before. Can you fast tomorrow?"

"Yes, I haven't eaten anything since noon, so I'm halfway there already. I'm going to undo the circles now." He danced among the circles again, chanting as he went. I kept out of his way, until he said we were free to move about as we wished. I picked up the digital watch that Nancy had sent with

the computer paper under which it lay. He collected a book from a glass fronted cabinet and escorted me to Foresby's sitting room where he retrieved *KING LEAR*.

"Would you mind if I read this book?"

"You may keep it if you like. I don't know if you'll enjoy it; it has a sad ending."

"That's all right. You might as well sleep here. I'm certain Mistress Foresby won't mind. I'll take you to breakfast in the morning."

It wouldn't be fair to the boy to eat while he could not. "I think I'll also fast — just in case. Do you want me to read the Kavastia, too?"

"No, I think I should just be able to get through it once, myself."

"Then, I'll sleep late, if you don't mind."

It was a short night, but still too long. I woke at first light. I delved into my briefcase for something to read and got a good start on a highly recommended history of Canada before Rupert tapped at the sitting room door.

His uniform was fresh, but he had not shaved. He explained sheepishly that he had not slept much, for he had read *King Lear* before starting on the Kavastia.

"Did you get any sleep? Did you find what you need for the spell? Did you enjoy the *Lear*?"

"Yes to all three. How much time do we have?"

I showed him the watch. Nancy must have reset the watch at intervals, so that she and Foresby would know when to be ready on their side. I had done some calculations and concluded that we had most of the afternoon and evening before time to rescue Foresby and myself. I advised another nap.

A knock at the door postponed the nap. A man in more braid than Rupert wore had come with a summons to the king. The prince assured me that I would be presentable in one of Foresby's frocks. As we followed the usher through the castle, I asked Rupert quietly how low I should curtsy and would he please tell me who was who when we went into the king's presence.

"Don't worry, you only give a half curtsy — like so — to the king, and you're short-sighted, so you never recognize anybody. You address everybody as 'deary', even my father. That's how I knew that you were telling the truth; in the garden, you called me 'my lord'."

"If you're lying, I'll turn you into a frog. Whatever I do or say here is of concern to more than me." I hoped to goodness that the usher would not find our cryptic remarks extraordinary or alarming. Rupert grinned and claimed that he told the truth, always.

Rupert bowed to the man at the head of the table immediately after entering the doorway, so I bobbed a half curtsy in the general direction of the table as I entered.

"Your Majesty, a good morning to you." Rupert then nodded at the others, calling their identities in order. "George, Stefan. Uncle David, your Eminence."

George wore the same uniform as Rupert; Uncle David, also in uniform, sat beside him. Your Eminence sat by Stefan; both wore bright blue robes like those of a Renaissance cleric.

Uncle David said, "You look like the hells, Rupert. You need to keep a decent regimen of early to bed, early to rise."

"I tried that. You threw me out — as did my lord archbishop when I tried to apply myself to saving my soul. I have always been grateful that Mistress Foresby is more forgiving." Rupert gestured at his uncle, the archbishop and myself in turn.

"Hush, deary." Surely, Mistress Foresby would not allow Rupert to speak to his elders so.

"I beg your pardon, Mistress." He did not sound contrite. He held a chair for me next to the archbishop and sat down at my other side. The archbishop looked down his borzoi-like nose at me.

"Well, then," the king said briskly, "we are met to discuss the division of my lands. I have devised a test that will be fair to all my sons."

Uncle spoke immediately. "I tell you that a passage of arms is the only true test of manhood."

"Which only your dear nephew George could hope to win," the archbishop sneered. Stefan did look a bit weedy, but Rupert might make a worthy opponent.

"Besides, courage and piety are not the only attributes needed to hold a land and guide her people," I put in — no sense to leave Rupert out of the running before they'd even started.

"Education is no substitute for wisdom." The archbishop was not pleased to have another usurp even so little of his place.

King Carl slapped his hand on the table to call order. "Of course, you are all correct. I will ask my sons to take a year and a day to find me the best of presents that I may decide how best to divide my lands among them."

In my opinion, that was certainly trouble brewing. The others looked unhappy at this. Carl's expression brooked no protest from the lot of us.

Someone had to ask, so I did. "When does this year and a day start? Who's allowed to accompany the boys, excuse me, the princes? Are there bounds to the search? If we three governors stay behind, what are we to do, rather than sit idle?"

"My God, woman, what a coil you make of something so straight-forward." The archbishop was out of his chair as though I had challenged him to a duel.

The king slapped the table again. "Sit down, your Eminence. She asked pertinent questions. Next Firstday, after a day of fasting and prayer, your Eminence may bless my sons' errands. I will provide them transportation. My lord brother will provide one of the palace guard as companion for each, and Mistress Foresby, some talisman to keep each safe wherever they might go. Of course, my sons, you are free to decline any or all of the provisions. You may go as far as you wish, as long as you return by the allotted end time. Your advisors will stay here to continue their other tasks for Navorant. I will judge your gifts and apportion my lands accordingly at the end of the month after your return."

"What if," asked Rupert, almost too quietly to be heard, "we never come back from the quest?"

"If you do not come back, I will divide your portion between your brothers. If you come back late, I shall welcome you in my house, but you will not inherit an inch of sod from me."

"I don't think I'll get much sleep in the next two days," Rupert said.

Dismissed, we went back to Foresby's library.

"Would you be willing to put up with me for a year and a day in your world, Mistress McKeon? I think it were better for me to take my journey as far from my brothers as possible."

"I see a pile of 'ifs' in the way, but I suppose I could find somewhere for you to stay reasonably safe for that amount of time. Perhaps, we could even get you into school as a way to pass

your time. It might be difficult — my country has a complicated bureaucracy — but it would be worth the try."

"Good, for I know what I will give my father. If he doesn't appreciate the gift, then I'll leave Navorant and never look back."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"I only mean that I will give the only thing that is truly mine — myself. If that won't do, what will? I'll persuade Mistress Foresby to take me as her apprentice, and we'll be away like tinkers if my father says he cannot love me."

"Talk to Mistress Foresby about it first," I warned. He agreed too readily.

From the Kavastia, I read the ingredients for a preliminary spell, which would ensure that Rupert stayed put while the translation spell exchanged me for Foresby, as Rupert collected each item from the cabinets and closets in the library. We managed to get the set-up spell worked correctly. Rupert exclaimed, "I wasn't certain that I could really do it. Even George could have dispersed the circles as I did yesterday."

Perhaps it was elation, but I thought the palsy that shook him was more likely due to fasting and lack of sleep. I made him sit on a chaise lounge at the back of the room and extracted his promise to take a nap. I went downstairs. There, I wrote my estimation of what Foresby faced on her return and pinned it to her frock as I hung it in the closet.

The Timex woke me from my nap. I dressed in my slightly worse-for-wear business suit and woke Rupert. He told me to sit on my case in the center of the floor as he redrew the circles around us. He danced as he had when taking the circles down the night before, chanting and gesturing to the quarters and whatever. Eventually, I felt as though someone had turned up the furnace. Then I saw my office superimposed on my view of Foresby's library. I sneezed, and the library disappeared.

"Welcome home." Nancy wore orange today.

"Glad to be here."

"I wish it had been me, you know." The statement was typical; Nancy is also our fantasy and science fiction expert.

"You certainly would have handled the whole thing much better than I. Still, Mistress Foresby got what she wanted."

"She said she hadn't."

I explained about Rupert's decision. "I think Mistress Foresby will be sorry she let that djinn out of his bottle. Now that he knows the spell, if she doesn't send him to us, he'll come on his own. What in the world am I going to do with a seventeen-year-old boy?"

Nancy promised to come up with a good answer.

Next day a pile of crystals appeared in the center of the office floor with a note telling us to sell them to the nearest New Agers in payment for our help, and asking what Rupert should bring with him. We provided magazine photos of our local fashions and documents for a bit of sorcerous forgery. Rupert appeared in my office a week later, dressed in worsted trousers and a button-down collared shirt, carrying a box of clothes, an ersatz British passport, student's visa, medical records, and so on in his name. I certainly hope that his doppelganger never existed in this world, for as far as Foresby could determine, no double for Rupert showed up in Navorant.

Nancy took him home to her parents to stay and enrolled him as an exchange student in the local high school. Nancy's folks treated him as family and took

him to all the local points of interest. He got a job at a grease burger stand for pocket change.

The prince had a wonderful year. He joined the Debate Club, the Chess Club and the soccer team. He played Bassanio in a school production of *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*. He also managed to fall in love several times, but wasn't seriously wounded.

As Navorant hasn't yet discovered romantic antiquity, the local Society for Creative Anachronism amused him. Still, he joined their sword classes to keep in practice, first as student, then as his previous training became apparent, as an instructor.

When it came time for Rupert to leave, Nancy's parents threw a farewell party. For a parting present, Nancy and I gave him an annotated Shakespeare. We spirited him away to our office after he kissed all the girls and promised to write to everyone.

Rupert did write. He explained that, on the day that he came to us in Kansas City, he had left the copy of *KING LEAR* on his father's bed.

George brought home a neighboring princess, ready to produce his heir in a few months — thus presenting his fa-

ther with a daughter-in-law and the next heir. Stefan brought his father the bones of a martyr saint.

King Carl gave George the whole kingdom. Stefan received his father's blessing and will eventually assume the archbishopric of Navorant.

In accepting Rupert's gift, King Carl also blessed him and charged Mistress Foresby with training Rupert as state wizard, which was what Rupert wanted all along.

Nancy and I have added a shelf of semi-precious Navorantine crystals in the New Age section of our store. They sell quite well; customers claim that they work like magic.

✱

JAN COMBS lives in Kansas with her husband and the younger of their two children. She notes that she began writing to keep herself awake (during high school geometry) but now keeps herself awake to write.

MARGARET ORGAN-KEAN is an artist living in Seattle. She studied art and art history at Boston University and University of Washington. She has a day job, working with computers, but hopes that eventually she will be able to support herself with her artwork.



Artwork by Margaret Organ-Keane

To Kill The Undead

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Almost the first thing which Lythande had learned to do when first she came into any village was to look about for a wineshop or an inn. Because although one of the laws by which such an Adept lived was that she might never be seen to eat or drink by any man, yet for the price of a bowl of soup or a cup of wine, she could sit and listen as long as she liked to the gossip of the village and find out whether anyone in the area was in need of the services of a mercenary magician — and put her in the way of earning her bread.

On this particular evening she had walked a long time and was very weary, so she did not immediately make herself known, but sat for some time listening to the quiet rumor of voices about her.

At first, she was so tired that the voices rose and fell over her head almost without making an impression. Then she heard one voice saying aloud, "But what is this creature? It prowls by night, and tears out the throats of its victims; yet with the light it vanishes away, and lies in hiding all the day? Is that any natural beast, or some evil thing out of legend?"

"A wolf?" suggested another voice.

"Not by any means," replied the first voice. "A wolf is not unlike a big dog; and every wolf I have known is gentler and more timid than any dog. I have reared many wolves taken from the wild as pups; and never did I know any

wild wolf but hunted in a pack. This killer hunts alone."

"Wolves are like other beasts," the first argued, "and no beast so tame but it can turn rogue. It might well be such a wolf turned rogue — but I say this is no natural beast."

"A werewolf, maybe?" sneered the first.

"As likely a werewolf as anything else," said the first gloomily. "But then perhaps it is only a matter of finding what shape it wears by day — and hunting it down in that shape."

At this point, Lythande straightened up. Her long aristocratic-looking feet were stretched out to the fire. She slowly lowered them to the stone floor and said, in that carefully neutral voice, "I know something of werewolves. How do you know this thing which preys upon your people is a werewolf?"

"What else could it be?" demanded the first speaker truculently. "To hunt by night and tear out the throat of its victims?"

"I can think of many things," Lythande answered carefully. "For all you say, it could still be some form of wild animal; a wolverine, perhaps; or an escaped lion from a menagerie. A captive tiger, or some other predator escaped its owner. Or, if you are speaking of supernatural creatures, why a werewolf, rather than a vampire or night-ghost or some similar creature?"

"Why not indeed?" demanded the first speaker.

"Tell me," Lythande asked, "does it hunt by night? Is there any way to see something it has attacked?"

A sturdy farmer spoke up, "In my barn, magician, is a sheep it has killed. You are welcome to see it — any of you."

Lythande slid her battered sandals on her feet, and several of the others rose and followed the farmer into a nearby barn. There, by the light of a lantern hanging from a rafter, lay a dead sheep, lacerated and much torn.

Lythande knelt down by the dead animal. From the tingling of the blue star on her forehead she could tell she was in the presence of some powerful magic. "It might well be victim of a werewolf or vampire at that. So what then can we do about it?"

"Can you kill this thing? This — vampire or whatever?"

"No," said Lythande. "By definition, a vampire is already dead. There is no way to kill the dead. I can do many things but to kill the dead is not among them."

That silenced them all for a moment. Then the innkeeper said tentatively, "Then can you — do away with this thing, dead or alive? If it is — for instance — a werewolf?"

"Be the Gods willing, I can," Lythande said.

The innkeeper said, "I know something of magicians, I dassay you will charge this village a pretty price for getting rid of this thing."

"Alas," Lythande said, "even a magician must somehow get a living. Is the presence of this thing not losing you much in the way of profit that you can gain if I rid you of it?"

"Thass true," said one of the farmers. "We can't even sell the dead sheep at market — an' if this thing gets much worse, we'll all lose all our sheep an' go broke. I'd say hire the magician now to get rid of this thing — an' pay him a decent wage afore we all of us loses our living."

"Thass true," said another farmer. "I suggest every farmer in this village gives half a silver piece. That way no one of us has to pay the whole thing."

Lythande looked around the room. Even at a quarter silver apiece she would make a good fee, for there were thirty men or so in the room. She checked both the scabbards hanging at her belt; the right-hand sword of steel, for footpad or villain, the left-hand sword for ghost or supernatural monster or any creature from the realms of

magic. Then she bent to the floor and again slipped her battered shoes on her feet, tying them securely round her ankles. If she survived this battle, she thought, she must find out if there was a sandal-maker or shoe-cobbler in this village, and spend a piece or two of her silver to have new shoes made or the old ones botched together. These were as filled with holes as if they had been left out in the winter rains. For the moment, she murmured a spell which would give the road-worn bits of



leather some semblance of wholeness; she did not wish the locals to see how battered they were, but this spell could last only a certain length of time.

There was no sense in delaying. Lythande went out into the star-sprinkled night and took up her station in the corral where the town's animals were kept. She had hoped to spend most of this evening with feet to the fire, but the chance of earning such a fee should not be put off. Wrapping herself in the warm folds of her mage-robe, Lythande took up a station by the fence and settled down to wait and watch.

The night dragged; it was damp and cold and Lythande wished she had had leisure to have a cup of hot soup unobserved. As always, she had in the pockets of her mage-robe some pieces of dried fruit and she chewed glumly on a handful of raisins without enthusiasm as she waited. The moon had set when she heard a soft padding sound and saw in the darkness two green and luminescent points of light at the very edge of the sheepfold. Lythande swallowed a raisin and in the darkness made

certain her swords were loose in their sheaths.

And then she remembered. Months ago, in being pursued by the Walker Behind, she had struck with her magical dagger—and it had been destroyed—melted away, disappeared. In effect, then, she was unarmed against this thing if it were any form of magical creature. Her regular steel dagger was unharmed, not that a regular dagger of ordinary steel would be that much good against a werewolf or vampire. In the faint greenish light of ambient magic, Lythande examined what was left of the blade of the magical spelled one.

Not much: beyond the hilt only some three inches of twisted, melted metal remained. It shone faintly in the dimness with its own eerie light. Would it then be any defense against the uncanny green eyes still visible at the edge of the field?

Lythande could only try. The strength of the enchanted blade was not in its metal—of that there might be little left—but then, it might well have been drained of its magic too, in her confrontation with the Walker Behind.

Lythande had no idea whether the faint tingle she now felt in the Blue Star was from the broken magical dagger, from the magical beast she could faintly see and sense approaching, from her own ambient magical senses and the Blue Star itself, or from something else unseen in the darkness.

It was near her now. She whispered a spell which would temporarily void the air of all magic near her, even including her own. This way she would be able to diagnose whether the thing approaching her were any natural creature or a thing of magic. The fact that for a few seconds of the spell she would also be at the mercy of the thing, whatever it might be, was not important; she had to know.

Sure enough, the green eyes vanished; but Lythande knew perfectly well that the terrible creature had not gone away, it was only that without magic she could no longer perceive it. The chance that it was not magical had always been very small, but she had to examine it.

She pulled the broken magical dagger from its sheath. Broken or no, it was



Artwork by Hannah M.G. Shapero

all she had to face the creature. With the broken remnant she struck out at the gleaming green eyes, and at the same time she murmured the strongest banishing-spell in her repertoire. She did not think it was strong enough, not for this creature, but it was all she had.

The green sparks of the eyes went out. Hardly believing in her good fortune, Lythande sheathed the broken dagger. Well, she thought, while I am having my sandals cobbled, I must also find some weapons-maker who can attempt to replace the magical dagger. And while she was at it she must somehow find herself a spell-candler who could fashion some stronger spells. There was an old adage — and Lythande had never yet known it to be wrong, but there was a first time for everything — that for every magical danger there was somewhere a spell to conquer it. But, thought Lythande pessimistically, it did not follow that she could find that spell.

She took a careful backward look. No, there was nothing — as yet — following her.

But then — would she know?

A short time later she entered the common room of the inn, and when she was greeted with many questions, told them briefly that the beast was gone, "so far as I know; bearing in mind that I am neither a God, nor yet infallible."

They would have loaded her with their best, and Lythande was tempted. But she had learned it was not well to let commoners, no matter how grateful, diminish her mystery, so she thanked them courteously and went out into the rain, finding a little way down the road a snug barn where she slept warm, dry, and unseen. When she emerged, after breakfasting on an egg she found in a deserted nest and ate raw — no hardship this for she liked it better that way — and taking a cup of milk from a complaisant cow, who reacted better than most to her soothing-spells, she turned her steps toward the village in search of a cobbler for her broken shoes and a spellwright for the remnants of her magical dagger and the renewal of her arsenal of spells. This was not an unpleasant task, for it gave her a chance to speak freely with her only true peers, who were other magicians. She slept that night in the home of a local hearth-witch, who thought of it as an honor to entertain an Adept of Lythande's rank,

but when, emerging well-pleased, for the bargaining for the mending of her shoes had gone well, and returning to the inn to hear the local gossip, she heard with dismay and consternation that the thing was back, more virulent than ever.

"And it seems to have thrived on your banishing-spells," said the innkeeper maliciously, "for this time it has not only taken sheep, but two of the shepherd's dogs and the shepherd as well."

After the first shock of dismay, for it was rare indeed that her spells should fail, Lythande managed to collect herself, saying with apparent insouciance that she had promised results and she would therefore certainly deliver them. And then, as soon as she was unobserved, she sat down to think it over.

This vampire was dead. Well, of course, all vampires were dead by definition, and whatever she had done, she had told them she could not kill the dead — and in truth she had failed to do so. How could she then make good on her promise to rid them of the creature — or whatever it was?

She took out her small book of spells and opened it at random. She had often noticed that any particular spell she wanted would not be in the book till she was most in need of it. It did not disappoint her; the first spell on which her eyes fell was one to bring the dead back to life. At first Lythande was dismayed; the last thing she wanted to do was to bring this thing to life again. Then she stopped to think. She had said she could not kill the dead and thus — by the curious laws of magic — had defined the grounds on which this battle was to be fought. Her attempts to do away with the dead had failed. Was it then required of her that she should bring it to life so she could kill it?

There was nothing for it but to try. The magician went out again into the darkening fields, awaiting the coming of the magical creature. As soon as its wicked green eyes appeared at the edge of the field, only a little fainter than they had been before, Lythande began to repeat the spell which would bring the dead to life.

As soon as she began the eyes were arrested, held motionless in the thick darkness. Like twin green torches they glared at Lythande, and from somewhere — perhaps between the worlds — came the sound of a despairing whine. Then all was silent and in the

magical greenish glow Lythande could see the form of a man stretched on the ground. She should have known; if this spell awakened the dead to life, it would of course restore him in the form he had worn in life.

She had her magical dagger — the new one, not the old broken one — in her hand ready. She struck, then — a fraction of a second too late — remembered that this was, at the moment, no longer a magical creature.

Swiftly she spoke a spell rendering the air void of all magic. The last thing she wanted was to strike with her dagger of ordinary steel, and find that she was again facing a werewolf or vampire. The creature shimmered. It was already attempting shape-shifting, but Lythande's spell had trapped it in human form.

It gave a despairing — a human — cry as Lythande whipped up the dagger which was effective against mundane menaces. To a creature whose essence had been so long purely of magic, Lythande thought swiftly, how could anything be more humiliating than being killed in ordinary human form?

It lay dead before her, and she spoke — not unwillingly — a spell which would keep it from coming back to life. Everywhere in the village now, people were coming out of doors, and one of them bent over the pathetic corpse.

"Ah, Haymil," he said. "He was a suicide last year and buried in unhal-lowed ground."

"And therefore came back to an unnatural life," said Lythande. "And so you see that even a priest should err on the side of mercy. Had your priest allowed him to rest in sanctified ground, you could have saved many silvers."

They were all eager to buy her a drink, to shake her hand, but as for Lythande she could not too quickly shake the dust of the town off her shoes. At least, she reflected as the town vanished behind her in the distance, they were newly mended.



MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY hardly needs any introduction in these pages. A selection of her Lythande stories have been published in a collection of the same name.

HANNAH M.G. SHAPERO lives in Falls Church, Virginia. In addition to her fantasy and science fiction art, she is trained as an architectural illustrator and illustrates real estate ads.

An Interview with Peter Beagle

by Darrell Schweitzer

I suppose one of the most striking things about your career, other than how fine the books are, is how few of them there are, over such a long period of time. Only three novels (and a couple of shorter works) in as many decades. How long has it been since A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE?

A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE came out in 1960. Then my previous one — the one before the book that is coming out now — THE FOLK OF THE AIR, came out in 1987. I got a letter from Robin McKinley the other day. She is the nearest thing I've got to a protégé. And Robin mentioned that as a slow writer herself, it was a great comfort for her to know I existed, because everybody else seemed to write faster than she did.

I write other things fast. I can write non-fiction fast, screenplays fast, any bread-and-butter thing fast. Perhaps it is because I think differently about the novels, think in another gear if you like, that they come slowly.

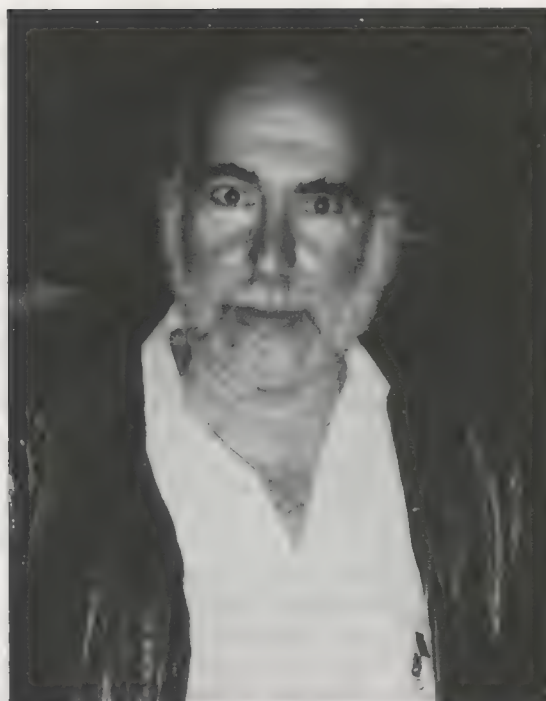
Is it because they're deeply personal?

Perhaps it's because everything else I've always done to make a living. Writing is the one way I've ever known to put bread on the table. So I had to learn a lot of crafts of one kind or another. I had to learn to do them fast. But I never expected to make a living off the novels. So they come more slowly and they're altogether different from everything else I do.

Once a novel is cooking, does it come quickly then, or is the actual act of writing slow, so that you might labor over two pages for a month and go on at that rate?

Both. You have a good run, where the stuff is coming so fast you can't believe it's you, and then you have one of those stretches where, sometimes for no reason and sometimes for very good ones, you're just building those sentences word by word, and you just know you'll never get to the end of this chapter. As always, the trick is to make the ones that came easily and the ones that came hard look as if they both came at the same pace so that people tell you how it seems to have been born in one inevitable flow of creation. But I can overworry. I can sit for the longest damn time trying to find the exact word for something that doesn't quite exist.

Perhaps I write screenplays faster because I love to write dialogue. That's always come very easily for me. But a lot of my time is just taken up in rewriting. I begin *fussing*.



What suddenly brought about A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE — if suddenly is the way to describe it? Why did you start then and there? I'd guess, for one thing, that you'd been reading a lot of Robert Nathan.

I certainly had been. As far as I'm concerned — and although he always said it was nothing like it — A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE is, if not a dead steal, a direct descendant of a book of his called ONE MORE SPRING, which was published in 1933, six years before I was born. I came across it in college. I wanted to do that.

As far as the genesis of A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE itself goes, I grew up a block and a half away from that cemetery. It was one of the few green places in the area, and my family and I and my friends and I used to go for walks there. I was going for a walk with my mother one afternoon, looking at an enormous mausoleum, and I can't remember which of us commented that if you could solve the food and water problems, you could probably live in one of these places. Well how would you be fed? Where would you get the food? I think I was the one who made the joke, "Well, like Elijah in the Bible, you get fed by a raven." And before we were out of the cemetery, I had the basic plot of the book.

Presumably this manuscript was going on the market around 1958 or 1959. It must have been fairly difficult to have such a work published at the time. Did the publishers have any idea what to do with it?

Strangely enough, it was not at all difficult — and I know how unusual that was for the time. I was incredibly lucky in a lot of ways. I had been adopted, in a literary sense, by an old poet and his wife, Louis and Bryna Untermeyer, who came across me when I was about fifteen. When I was seventeen they handed me over to the woman who was my agent for twenty years until she died, Elizabeth Otis, who was also John Steinbeck's agent.

And Elizabeth simply sold the book. She had a bid on it before Viking from Doubleday and turned it down, thinking that Doubleday was not a fit place for a young writer of

Elizabeth's standards. So she waited until Viking kicked in. And they did. I don't know how to describe it. It was another world, another attitude toward literature in some ways. I know how rare it was to have fantasy published and treated seriously in those days, but *there!* — the path was magically smoothed and I had no trouble at all, and I was taken, really, quite seriously for a first novelist. I didn't make a fortune off it or anything like it, but it's still in print.

You had somehow gone up the literature track, rather than up the genre science-fiction/fantasy track. I am sure if the novel had been published by Ballantine Books in 1960, things would have been very different.

You see, it's entirely arbitrary. Today I'm located — that book too — in the science fiction section of the bookstore. I understand why people who don't think of themselves as fantasy writers or children's book writers, or what-have-you, get very indignant at always finding themselves in that part of the bookstore, not in the literature section. There was a time, and it was not all that long ago, when things weren't quite as compartmentalized as that. Now it's so much a matter of packaging. If they don't know where to put you in the bookstore, you may never sell the book. You screw up the bookkeeping, you upset the sales reps. The one-of-a-kind writer, who is in neither this category nor that, like my wife, has a real problem. It's like when Avram Davidson was at the University of California at Irvine. Nominally he was a member of the English department. They could never really decide whether he belonged there, or in the History department or the Philosophy department. This bugged them a good deal.

Maybe your timing was just incredibly fortunate. One wonders what would have happened if, say, T.H. White had come along now.

The odds are that he'd be in the fantasy section, but you never know. It's so arbitrary. It's what the editor persuades the company to market you as, and what people get into the habit of seeing you as. I'm thinking of this because I've been hearing from Robin McKinley, whose last book, *DEER-SKIN*, did a nose-dive and simply disappeared, because it was *not* what people expected from Robin McKinley. It's a fantasy, all right, but it's not what people look for from her. I think it's a marvelous book. It's a wonderful step forward for her, but the point is, she upset the packaging. I couldn't even find the book, and I looked.

So now there is the problem of what people expect from Peter Beagle. Do you feel that you're in the shadow of THE LAST UNICORN?

In some ways I'll probably always be. I'm resigned to it, but I'm damned if I'm ever going to do it again. I've tried very hard to make each book different from the last. It's a matter of pride and of interest as well. So far, I've been lucky. One way or another I've made a living all this time. I've raised children. I've made house payments. I don't know what's coming beyond the next check. I'm sure about the next one, but the one after that, I don't know. But I can't do things any differently.

It's not even a question of being courageous and taking a noble stand. My newest novel, *THE INNKEEPER'S SONG*, is very different from anything else I've ever done, because it wanted to be like that. I think it's the best I've ever done.

But I can remember that I came across a book by Edgar Pangborn which I had never read, a historical novel called *A WILDERNESS OF SPRING*, which was published in 1958.

I thought it was a wonderful book. And I wrote to him and said, in effect, "I've known your stuff since I was a kid, but I have to say, honestly, I didn't know you were this good." Edgar wrote back and said that of all his books, that was the one that got blasted by the critics, disappeared completely, and is still hardest to find. As he remembered it, he got very drunk one night and sat up playing the piano, and the next day started writing another book.

You seem to have gotten slightly more prolific in that the gap between THE FOLK OF THE AIR and THE INNKEEPER'S SONG is not as great as the one between THE FOLK OF THE AIR and THE LAST UNICORN [1968]. What's happened here?

I'm not about to have an eighteen-year book gap again. That's inexcusable. It wasn't a book gap. It was just a novel gap. I did other books in between there. But, no I would certainly like to be more prolific and I have other books that I want to get to in my life. I've always had to put them down to do something else to make money. But that's nothing to complain about. The miracle is that I do make some money. I just figure that as long as I keep up in the rude peasant health which, thank God, my rude peasant ancestors bequeathed me, I'll get to the books.

Do books have their own time when they want to be written? This is, of course, only twenty-twenty hindsight, but THE LAST UNICORN would seem to be the sort of novel one would write in the mid-to-late '60s, as opposed to a novel one would write in, say, 1955.

In fact I tried writing it in 1962, in the summer that I was staying with the friend with whom I traveled to California in *ISEE BY MY OUTFIT*. We were sharing a shack in Cheshire, Massachusetts. He was painted all day, and I was trying to work on a new book. The first few chapters of *THE LAST UNICORN* as people know it come from that summer of '62. But there was another eighty-five or so pages that just never went anywhere. I'd give a good deal to know where they did go, because I'd like to look at them now. But they vanished completely, and I just dropped the book for a couple of years. I came back to it around 1965, after *OUTFIT*, and completed it. I don't know that it particularly had anything to do with the time or with who I was then or what I was trying to do with the book. The first book, *A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE*, was an homage to Robert Nathan. *UNICORN* is very much an homage to T.H. White, Thurber, and Lord Dunsany certainly, and James Stephens, as well as Bob Nathan.

I think that perhaps what I like about the new book, *THE INNKEEPER'S SONG*, is that it isn't an homage to anybody. Whatever it is, it's its own self.

What was THE FOLK OF THE AIR an homage to, except perhaps Berkeley, California? I had not seen Berkeley when I read the book, but later, when I came to the Bay Area for the first time, it all fit.

I tend to go back and forth between imaginary worlds, fairy-tale worlds, and the contemporary world. *A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE* did take place in the world I knew. *THE LAST UNICORN* is a fairy tale. *THE FOLK OF THE AIR* took place in California. I am most pleased that you recognized it as Berkeley, because I never assumed it would be. Some people do that beautifully, and I wasn't at all sure if I were turning Berkeley into something unrecognizable.

The new book, *INNKEEPER*, is set in an imaginary world, and the book I am beginning to work on now is a ghost story and set in our time, in the '90s. So I seem to go back and forth,

in a pattern I wasn't aware of until recently.

Could you say something more about THE INNKEEPER'S SONG? You may be more prolific than before, but a new Peter Beagle book is still infrequent enough to be news.

Briefly, I love to write songs. INNKEEPER comes out of a song I wrote one evening, called just that, "The Innkeeper's Song". For some reason the fit seized me, to take the figure of an innkeeper — who is usually a fat mein host or a skinny villain, letting the assassins in while you sleep — and these women in the song, black and brown and white, show up at his inn one night. The black one carries what he realizes is a sword-cane and walks rather like a sailor. The brown one has a pet fox that she takes with her, and the white one has a beautiful emerald ring on her finger. They simply take over his room. They sing, they laugh, they carry on, they fight, they cry, they sing again, they eat their way through his cheese and mutton; they call down for more wine — and ask him to send up the stable boy. In the morning they leave, and he's not sure who they were, what hit him, what their mission was or where they're going. The only thing he's really sure of is he'll have to get a new stable boy.

So I left it at that. It was one night's work, and I began only a few years later thinking of it as a novel. It's told from the point of view of all the people in the song and many who aren't. The innkeeper himself says that although the song has his name on it, he never wrote it. He's not a songwriter; he's an innkeeper. He gripes that the damn fox is in the song too. He always hated that fox.

I loved being all these different people. It was one of the nicest experiences I've had as a writer, because I've never used the "I" point-of-view in fiction. For me this was pure luxury. The next one is also told from a first-person point-of-view, but only one. I had been the omniscient author for so long that this is a real vacation from knowing every side to a story.

It's odd that you'd never actually done first-person before. Most writers seem to start out that way. But surely there are delights in both methods. The omniscient author gets to meet more people.

One reason I like doing first-person is that I love theater and I'm comfortable with actors — we have some in the family — and I like being other people. The real wonder for me of writing fiction is that you don't have to be stuck with the person you are all the time. Joyce Cary, who is one of my favorite writers, had an incredible gift for writing from the point of view of somebody he wasn't. His trilogy, *HERSELF SURPRISED*, *TO BE A PILGRIM*, and *THE HORSE'S MOUTH*, is told from the viewpoints of three people who have crossed each other's paths to one degree or another over forty years. They aren't at all alike, and how Cary could be all these people and feel and think like them is an absolute joy and a wonder to me to this day; because they aren't Joyce Cary, at least not obviously. There's always that connection, Heaven knows, between you and the character. There's always that corner where you blend and blur. But if ever I'm talking about the things you can do with first person, I always use Cary as an example.

Aside from being people you aren't, how about being people you are? How much autobiography is in your novels?

Really not a whole lot. In terms of thoughts, feelings, undoubtedly, but I very rarely use people I've known directly in my books, for instance. There's an element here, a turn of speech there, and that's all. I think I don't like most fiction that tends to be heavily autobiographical. There are

always exceptions, but I'm very reticent, and I have an air of not being reticent. I hide and mask things very well. It's not an act. When I was in therapy in Seattle getting acquainted with my therapist, who was a good man, he asked, "Well, tell me something about yourself. Do you have any hobbies? Do you collect things?" I told him, "I collect masks and boxes. You want to make something of it?" And we both laughed. But I do. I love masks. I love personae. I love, again, actors. To me it's so much more fun to live somebody else's autobiography in fiction than my own. Robert Nathan began writing an autobiography once. I have the partially completed manuscript. He got up to about 1944 and gave it up. As he said to me at the time, "What's the point of it. I just don't like going back through and making all those mistakes again." I understand fully. My own life really doesn't interest me to write about, except for the odd story or funny one-liner. But I do like to invent and borrow and synthesize lives.

How well and how long did you know Robert Nathan? Was he in any sense a mentor?

I read his work very much in high school and college. My mother remembers me calling her from college to tell her about this guy I'd been reading a lot of, and saying, "I want to write like that." Of course I'd been saying that about different writers since I was a kid, from Saroyan to Steinbeck on up. But Nathan stuck. We were introduced by a mutual friend around '64 or '65, and I was friends with him for the last twenty years of his life. He lived to be ninety-one. I always saw him when I was in Los Angeles. We wrote a great many letters to each other. I'm not sure if he was a mentor or not. He said to me once in utter candor, "I think you work gets better as it moves away from mine." But from him I learned a great deal about the life of a person who can't *not* be a writer and what you do when people think you died in 1950 and you still have to write. He was a bitter man in a lot of ways, and with good reasons. He was also funny. He'd lived a life that he didn't think was interesting, but I thought was. Some of the nicest moments I like to remember were spent at his house. I'm still in touch with his widow, the actress Anna Lee. She's still on *General Hospital*, although she's just turned eighty. And, I miss him. I hadn't realized that until I was talking about him fairly recently. It struck me that it's been eight years, and I do miss him. I'd still like to get another letter from him. Like Avram [Davidson], he wrote very funny letters.

He's somebody whose work needs a bit of championing, I think. Virtually all of his work is forgotten. Most fantasy readers have no idea who he was. For some reason he never got discovered by the fantasy field.

He got forgotten by the mainstream field and never discovered by the fantasy field. The only book of his that anyone is likely to know now is *PORTRAIT OF JENNIE*. We talked about that because he said that *THE LAST UNICORN* would likely dominate everything I did and I'd have to live with it. He said, "There were times I'd just get furious about *PORTRAIT OF JENNIE*, because I know I wrote a number of books that were better than that. Nobody knows them and they never will. And there are other times when I think, 'How can I hate Jennie?' So many wonderful things happened to me because of that book. Better that they should have happened for whatever reason, than never to have happened at all."

I've read Robert Nathan's work aloud at gatherings when I was reading from other people. I remember doing an

evening's worth of readings from people's work that meant something to me. I like to think that eventually he will be reprinted and rediscovered. But it's very difficult to be immortal if you're not in print. The greatest thing that Hemmings and Condell did for Shakespeare was to keep him in print. Books disappear. They tear off the covers and pulp them.

I suppose your career will be dominated by THE LAST UNICORN. But, had you not written THE LAST UNICORN, would another book of yours have achieved that purpose, or would you merely be an obscure author today?

I simply don't know. There are too many 'ifs' involved in that. The thing you have to do is, on the one hand, keep your head down and do your work, and then — and this is the hardest thing — to train yourself to live with rejection. My line is, "Hell, I've been thrown out of better joints than this." You must develop at all costs a kind of arrogance — if that's the word — which keeps you believing somehow that what you are doing will have hearers, will find someone, and is important, and you know how to do it. Words to live by. A story I tell a lot of people has to do with Ethel Merman on stage, in the wings on opening night, being asked if she wasn't scared when she thought how many celebrities were in the audience. Merman's answer, apparently, was, "F--- 'em. If they could do what I do, they'd be up here." And if I could stitch that into a sampler, I would, because it's very important to believe that, even if it's not true.

But then, you actually have something to back it up with. There are people out there who have all the arrogance, and nothing to deliver.

That's given, certainly. I think it was Dizzy Dean who said in all innocence, when accused of bragging about his pitching, "It ain't bragging if you can do it." And he could. I'm not sure Ernest Hemingway ever said anything else really wise, but he did say one thing when dealing with critics. He said, "If you believe them when they tell you you're good, you believe them when they tell you you're bad." It is important to develop this kind of tunnel-vision, arrogance — call it what you will — that says, "I have to do this and it doesn't matter that it's entirely insignificant in the cosmic order of things." I have to do this, and it's something that I can do that nobody else is, because if somebody else was doing it, I would read it. You have to believe that, whether or not you can deliver. In the end, that's such a subjective matter anyway. But you have to believe it.

All of your fiction is fantasy. What is the special appeal of fantasy for you? Why isn't there, in the midst of all this fantasy, a detective novel or a realistic novel about life in California or something like that?

I would love to write a detective novel. I hope to do that before I die.

I have an historical novel I'd like to do. But the fact is that fantasy is a way I think. Even if I wrote a "mainstream realistic" novel, the fact that I am a fantasy writer would still inform it somehow. Peter Dickinson says, "I am a science-fiction writer if I never write a word of science fiction, and I hardly ever have. I write all kinds of stuff, not just science fiction, but I approach everything like a science-fiction

writer." He knows what he means a bit better than I do, but I know that I approach everything, including total realism, like a fantasy writer. It's just how I am.

Is it possible to define this approach?

I don't think so. It doesn't have to do with monsters or alien forms of life. I'm not even sure it has to do with language. It's just a way of seeing things, perhaps of being a bit more aware of the things that go on just beyond the corner of your eye, of a feeling that the laws of the cosmos operate as they should when you're watching them; but on alternate Thursdays, who knows? Perhaps it's just a child's awareness that a lot more is possible than adults tell you. I think most kids have this. When I was little I firmly believed that everything was alive, whether it moved or not. In some way, maybe that's it. Maybe I still do.

How much of fantasy is deliberate artifice, with the fantastic elements deliberately made up? This is where I would draw the line between occult fiction and fantasy fiction. If you believe it's true, that's occult fiction. If you're aware you're making it up, that's fantasy.

I know I'm making it up, but the paradox is that sometimes you make it up so well that it turns out true. I don't know how else to describe it. I once had someone come up to me, an editor I knew, who had read part of *THE FOLK OF THE AIR*, which mentions a particular character, and said, "I didn't know you knew ____" and he named a friend of his, whom of course I had never heard of. He was absolutely convinced that I knew that particular person. I believe very greatly in the power of making things up. I'm glad you mentioned that.

In a sense, fantasy may be an attempt to improve on reality.

It's to get at reality, to get at some underlying reality. To me, paradoxically, fantasy seems to be the only way of approaching the truth.

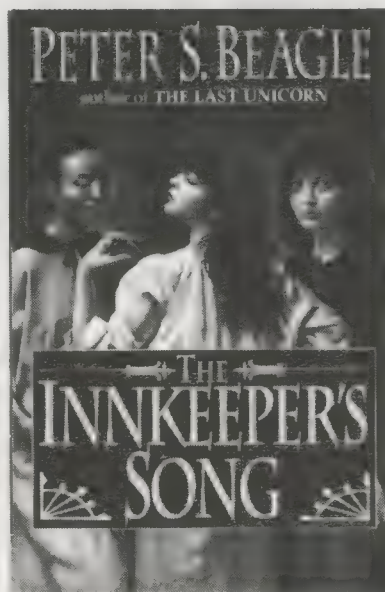
To conclude, can you talk a little bit about the book you've just started — or is that dangerous?

I don't want to talk too much, because you wind the spring down. I'll just say that it is a ghost story, though not like *A FINE*

AND PRIVATE PLACE. It does take place in the modern world, part of it in the United States and the bulk of it in England, where I haven't been for a long time. I need to go back to England, to get the smell of things, if you like. The story is told from the point of view of a girl of twelve or thirteen, which, for all I know, will mean the tendency will be to market it in a different category, as a young adult novel. I hope not, simply because there's a question of money. Young adult means less money. But, there are ghosts in it, though it isn't *A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE*. There are two ghosts, and there are night-creatures of English folklore. One thing I've realized, again, thinking about Robin McKinley's books after I got her letter — one thing we have in common is that there is always an animal in our stories somewhere. In this particular one there is the girl's cat, whose name is Mister Cat. She's always called him that, just Mister Cat. And there is a ghost cat, and her name is Miss Sophia Brown. That's as much as I feel like going into.

Thank you, Peter.

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Artwork by Adrian Bourne

Long ago in ancient Greece, so the legends say, there lived a sculptor named Pygmalion, who created a statue of a woman that was lovely beyond compare. Entranced by the exquisite beauty of his creation, the sculptor fell in love with the statue, naming it Galatea. Pygmalion swore he could love no mortal woman, because none could compare to his flawless sculpture. He begged Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, to bring the statue to life. Touched by the intensity of his ardor, Aphrodite took pity upon the sculptor and breathed life into his creation. Galatea was transformed from cold marble into a lovely, living woman. She fell into Pygmalion's arms, and they lived happily ever after. Or so the legends say ...

The sculptor Pygmalion stepped back and gazed at the statue that stood before him, his expression a mix of rapt wonder and frustrated desire. There was rock dust in his hair and all over

his face, and he hadn't slept or eaten well in days. She — he had long since stopped thinking of the statue as "it" — was finished at last. She was the image of his perfect woman, she was everything he had ever dreamed of and, after long weeks of work, she was finished. And it was going to do him absolutely no good at all.

He had been obsessed with the sculpture from the moment the block of marble was delivered to his studio. Most sculptors' marble is white, but this block was the warm pink of feminine flesh, delicately veined in blue. The stonecutter had bragged about the rarity of the marble, but Pygmalion barely heard the cutter's boasting as he thrust a hefty payment into the stonecutter's gnarled hands and shoved him out the studio door. Already, Pygmalion fancied he could see the figure of a beautiful woman trapped within the rock, and he was determined to release her.

He began with a heavy hammer and

chisel, knocking away big chunks of marble to reveal the contours of a graceful feminine silhouette. He worked without a model, convinced that even the most beautiful woman would fall short of the radiant ideal he imagined. When the rough outlines were in place, he switched to a finer chisel and meticulously tapped away, removing smaller and smaller pieces of stone, smoothing and polishing as he shaped the woman of his dreams.

The work took weeks and, as he labored, Pygmalion grew increasingly obsessed with the woman he imagined. She would be graceful, he thought, shaping slender arms and tapering fingers. She would be sweetly yielding, eager for his embraces; he rounded her hips, narrowed her waist, and shaped her full, high bosom. She would listen attentively when he spoke, he mused, carving the shell curve of an ear. Best of all, she would be reticent, soft-spoken. He shaped her full lips, carefully keeping them closed.

by Lauren B. Hurto

As the statue neared completion, Pygmalion tumbled into despair. The pink marble eerily resembled human skin, but it was cold and hard to the touch. His exquisite sculpture could never be more than a lifeless thing of stone, and what living woman could match her? As he chipped away, removing the tiniest flakes of marble, Pygmalion's eyes often filled with frustrated, self-pitying tears.

Finally, in desperation, Pygmalion resolved to go to the Temple of Aphrodite to beg for a miracle from the Goddess of Love. He put aside his sculpting tools, bathed and dressed in his finest toga, and set out. Along the way, he stopped in the noisy, crowded marketplace, buying an immense bouquet of flowers to lay at the goddess' feet. Then he crossed the market square and hurried down the street as fast as his feet would carry him, until he reached his destination.

After his rapid trip through the mid-day heat and brilliant sun, Pygmalion was struck nearly blind by the sudden, cool darkness inside the temple. As his vision cleared, Pygmalion saw at the far end of the temple an enormous statue of the Goddess of Love, gracefully poised amid dozens of flickering candles. A huge brazier stood to either side of Her, emitting the blue smoke of fragrant incense in elegant, ascending spirals. At Her immense stone feet lay heaped a jumble of vivid flowers, bottles of sweet cologne, poems, prayers and letters, offered in sacrifice by innumerable heartbroken would-be lovers in the hope of winning Aphrodite's fickle favor.

Pygmalion tentatively stepped forward, placing his armload of flowers among the clutter of offerings at the feet of the towering statue (which he privately thought far less beautiful than the magnificent creation in his studio). Then, he dropped to his knees on the chilly temple floor and bowed his head in supplication.

Pygmalion prayed for hours, pouring out the tale of his hopeless passion, pleading with Aphrodite to bring his sculpture to life. At last, exhausted, he sat back on his heels and looked up into the face of the statue of the Goddess of Love. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw the hint of an enigmatic smile flicker across the great stone lips.

It was late when Pygmalion returned to his studio, and the light of the full moon poured through the open win-

dows, illuminating his beautiful, lifeless masterpiece. For a moment, he thought he saw the statue shift infinitesimally, and he leapt forward, certain that the Goddess of Love had deigned to grant his dearest prayer. But it was only a cruel trick of the moonlight, and when he touched the statue, it was cold and lifeless as ever. Aphrodite had denied his request.

Pygmalion ran his hands over the willowy figure, his heart filled with passionate agony. He cupped one smooth, cool cheek in his palm, and noticed a tiny blemish in the marble under his thumb. Annoyed with himself for failing to remove it sooner, Pygmalion picked up his hammer and chisel and laid the chisel tip against the statue's face, carefully positioning himself to strike the flaw away.

Pygmalion never knew whether Aphrodite granted his request, or whether it was simply the force of his own desire that worked the miracle. Whatever it was, the statue's eyes flew open and Pygmalion, amazed, took an involuntary step backward.

Galatea turned, and slowly raised her lovely arms. Then one dainty hand shot out and knocked the chisel from Pygmalion's shock-numbered fingers, while the other landing a stinging, back-handed slap on the astonished sculptor's cheek. "Do you have any idea," Galatea snapped, "how much that hurts?" Then she snatched up her skirts, leapt down from the pedestal and strode out of the studio, slamming the door behind her.

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LAUREN B. HURTO is an attorney and part-time law professor. She lives in Virginia with her husband, two stepsons, and an assortment of pets. A long-time fantasy reader, she says she began writing "having concluded that even the wildest fantasies bear more resemblance to reality than does the practice of law." This is her first sale.

ADRIAN BOURNE lives in Pacific Grove, California, and shows his work at SF conventions across the country. He also does animation and illustration for computer games.

The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- ◆ 1st Place: "Going There" by Gloria Wall
- ◆ 2nd Place: "The Demon's Lamentation" by Laura J. Underwood
- ◆ 3rd Place: "Mad Evren's Dreams" by Phyllis Ann Karr

Artwork:

- ◆ 1st Place: Ray Williams for "Going There"
- ◆ 2nd Place: Alicia Austin for "Mad Evren's Dreams"
- ◆ 3rd Place: Gail Butler for "Magic Thief"

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64. Your interest and enthusiasm mean a lot to us at *FANTASY Magazine*.

A Matter of Trust

by Emily R. Dunn

Although they freed Prince Coello from the wizard, they did not trust him.

In the first excitement of his return, he didn't recognize that lack of trust. His mother tearfully greeted him, enfolding him against her breast as she had done eight years before. His old tutor embraced him with a warmth he had never suspected. Even his uncle the king bestirred himself to a public show of welcome and a less public talk which lasted until dawn pinked the sky. The whole palace rallied to cocoon him in rich and heady welcome.

And there were other people with other ways to make him glad he was freed and to keep him — occupied. His cousins and old friends ushered him to a tavern near River Gate, where a barbarian wench danced for coins. They raided a petty uncle's cellar and drank his best wine in celebration. Many a night they gambled and feasted before weaving their tipsy ways back to the waking palace.

Yet Coello dreamed — of endless corridors, doors which shut at his approach, candles which snuffed out when he reached for them, dreams of a great palace with dark windows, desolate, time-ravelled, through which he roamed alone.

Eight years with the wizard had taught Coello to heed dreams. They were visions from the roots of the mind, grown to significance whenever anything was ill. Superficial changes in the

palace must have blinded him. Obeying the omen of his dreams, he looked past the changes to discover if there were deeper ills beneath.

He saw not one ill but many: the hastily averted eyes, the stopped conversations when he entered a room, hissing whispers that followed him up long corridors, an especial watch by palace guards which he suspected but dared not confirm. Worst of all, once the topics of the wizard's capture and his own return had been exhausted, even his oldest friends fell silent. They had continued a course of studies the wizard had not taught. Coello perforce sat mute while they argued some obscure dialectic or laughed over a memory he had missed.

The dreams worsened. He avoided sleep until exhaustion demanded it. He discovered a passion for solitude and spent hours alone, reckoning his future in the silken strands already woven to royal design.

In all his years with the wizard, Coello had longed only for home, for family and mother, chattering cousins and trenchant tutor. In his cold Spartan cell he had ached for a return to his royal life. He turned his back on the power the wizard wielded and yearned for all he had lost. Even then he had realized that traffic with a wizard, be he slave or willing, would change him in their eyes.

He expected that. He had not anticipated their morbid fascination with the feared wizard. He didn't expect and

couldn't understand the doubt that met his merest suggestion or the blank looks at his self-deprecating jests about a wizard's pawn. His family seemed to weave their alliances to keep him ever on the fringe. He was still of royal blood — that could not be denied — but separate, not part of the whole.

So it was, one night when sleep refused to come, Coello wended his way to the dungeons beneath the glittering palace. He had previously avoided that lower realm, for there was the wizard imprisoned. As he descended, he called himself all kinds of a fool. The guards would certainly report his visit. His family would distrust him the more. Yet his steps did not falter.

A circular room connected the maze of cells. As he stopped on the last step, Coello peered through the square peephole. The guards were dicing at a table. They were three, laughing, drinking ale. The stale air stirred at his entrance, and they looked up, sweat glistening on their faces. Recognizing him, they scrambled to attention, trying to hide their sport by blocking his view of the table.

Coello shut the heavy door, feeling a queer finality in the action. He spied a guard standing sentry far down the hall. That cell, he reckoned, was the wizard's.

"My lord prince." The grizzled sergeant cast a nervous glance at his fellows. Their surprise was evident in skittish eyes, shuffling feet, and Coello

thought it more than having been caught gaming. But they dared ask naught of a royal nephew, even a distrusted one.

"I want to see the wizard." Abrupt, terse even, but Coello knew no way to blunt the edge of his request.

The guards again exchanged looks. A long silence, which Coello did not make easier with explanations, then the sergeant stumbled into speech. "I don't think — my lord prince, you can't — that is, we've got no orders about that."

"Have you orders against it?"

"Well, no — but, my lord, are you — do you think—"

"Take me to him."

The man swallowed. He dared refuse no further. Shaking his gray-ing head, he turned on his heel.

"This way, my lord prince."

Their footsteps echoed hollowly in the cramped passage. The lone sentry kept his gaze on the door opposite, yet Coello sensed that every fibre of the man was focused on their approach. No sound or light came from the cells they passed.

The wizard's cell was barred with the addition of a ribbon, embroidered with ward-spells, looped around the lock. The thin silk sealed the door more effectively than mere lock and key did. The guard shot back the square peep-hole.

"No. Open it."

The man's eyes widened. "My lord prince,

I don't—"

Coello raised his gaze, and the sergeant, a foot taller, ducked his head and fumbled with the keys. The ward-spell was unlooped; the key grated in the lock. Torchlight flooded into the cell as the door swung open. Coello peered inside. He heard the guards' nervous breathing, sensed the clammy heat of their bodies, but he ignored them and focused on the figure slumped against the far wall.

Wizard. Scourge of the west hills. Dread lord. Brought low by a feeble old mage and betrayed by the slave he had trusted.

His head was bent, chin on chest. The once-immaculate clothes were grimed with soil and other filth.

Pale hair
straggled
over his
shoul-

ders. Linking his hands was a heavy chain; the manacles had already chafed his wrists raw. From where he stood Coello saw the ribbon of ward-spells entwined in the cold iron.

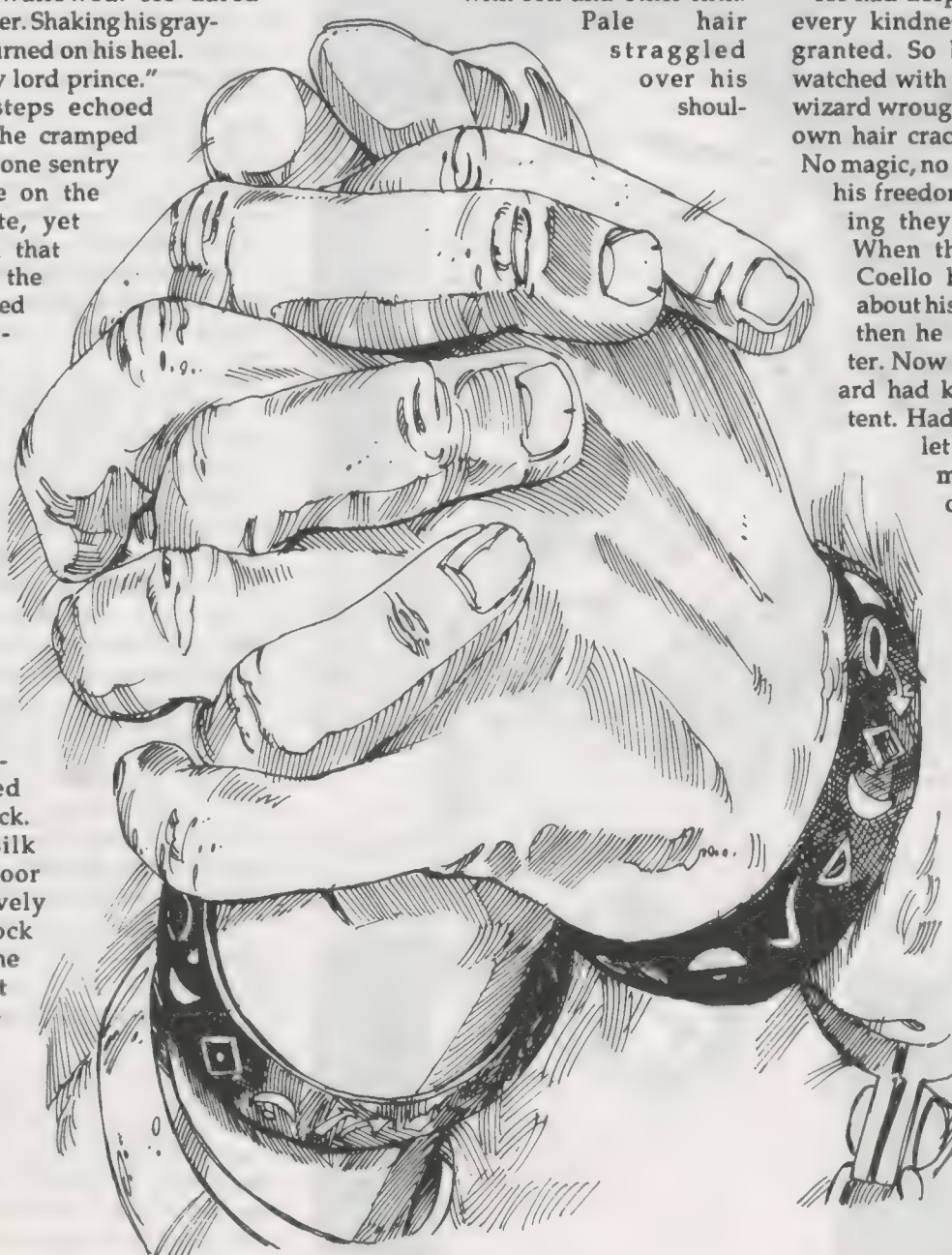
He had rejoiced when the mage defeated his master. Through eight years of slavery, only the dream of freedom had kept him hoping, alert for a chance to unseat the wizard. When it came, he seized it with both hands. He was the one who opened the postern to the mage and his apprentice. Wraithlike, he led the way to the wizard's tower. And he distracted his master so the mage could throw the first ward-spell and weave another, stronger one while the wizard fought to be free of the first.

He had despised all the wizard did, every kindness offered, every trust granted. So bitter was he that he watched with jaundiced eye while the wizard wrought spells so powerful his own hair crackled with their energy.

No magic, no enchantment was worth his freedom, no matter how alluring they had previously been. When the mage came to him, Coello had not thought twice about his answer. He had thought then he was deceiving his master. Now he wondered if the wizard had known of his slave's intent. Had known and decided to let Coello see what return meant: a different slavery, of a worse kind.

The pale head lifted. Coello blanked his expression as he met the wizard's amber gaze. The guard cleared his throat and shifted aside, as if the wizard, shackled by the ward-spells, would still give him the evil eye.

They did not speak. Coello read nothing in the wizard's eyes. He did not think his own face could be read. Yet the man smiled, that mocking smile which had daunted his former slave. Then the cynicism had chilled like a glacial wind. This time, however, Coello answered it, understanding the grief and mordant humor of it.



The wizard nodded, just once, and dropped his head. Obvious dismissal. Coello waited a bit longer, not wanting to return to the palace proper and the silken web of lies that smothered him. Yet neither was this his place. He turned and strode out with nary a look at the guards.

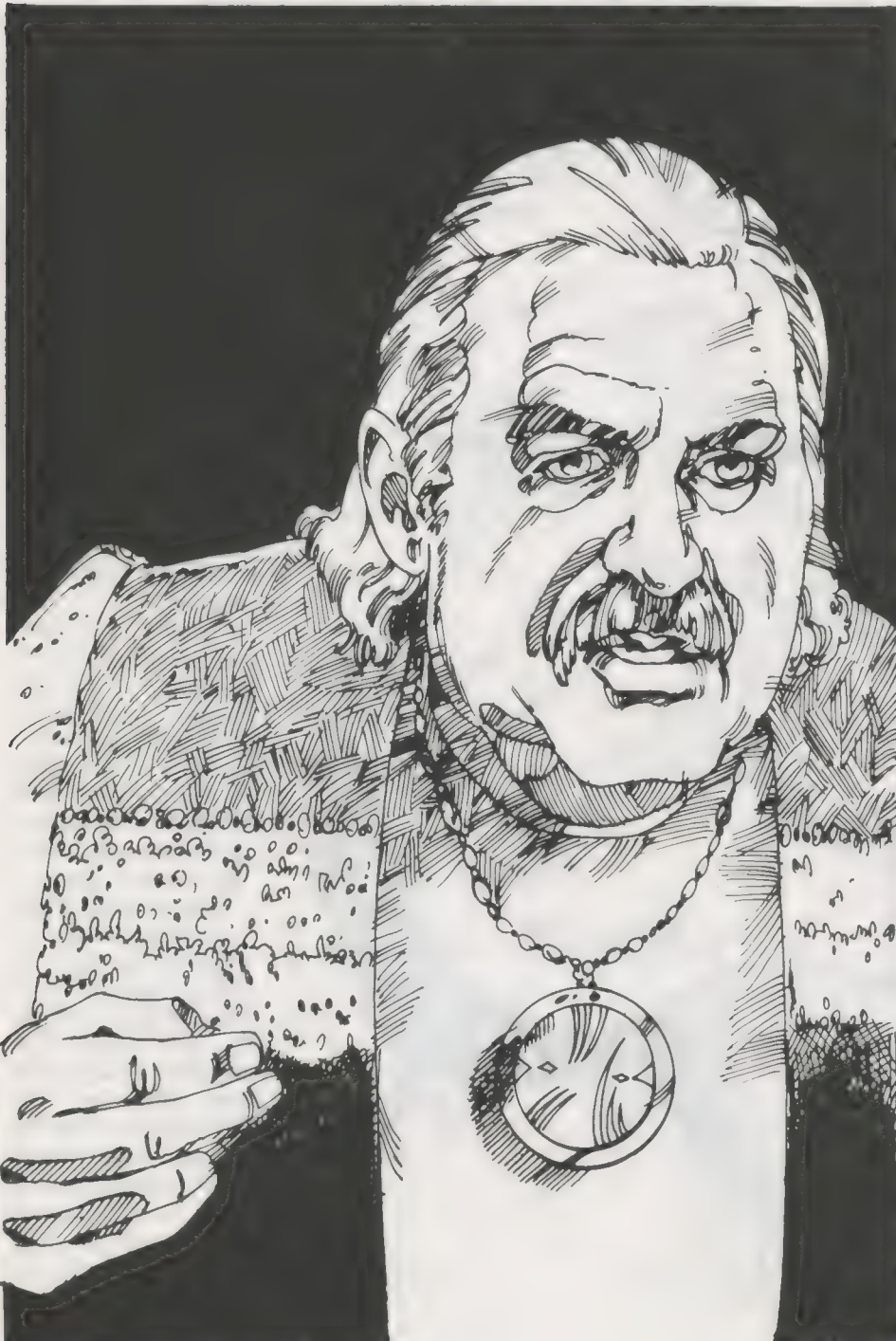
Mollit, the king's chief advisor, sought him out after noon.

Coello had expected the visit, although he had not taken the trouble to prepare any answers. He had just known the palace would trust him less

and accepted it, almost eager for any change.

The advisor was imposing, but Coello had spent eight years under the thumb of a man who called the wind with a word and snuffed a fire from across the room. He did not know who would be able to impress him now, but the chief advisor — with his purple robe stretched over his girth, the badge of office on his swollen belly — was not the man.

Mollit opened with a question about Coello's welfare, which he answered in good humor, as he did all the others.



Artwork by James Balkovek

He knew the man was neither interested nor cared what his pursuits were. The interview only began when the advisor folded his hands on his belly and dropped his two chins into four. A heavy sigh and doleful look conveyed displeasure. Although Coello had been waiting for just this moment, still his heart lurched painfully in his chest. He hoped his expression stayed blank, unwary, innocent.

"The chief guard, name of Ragan, came to me this morn. Most agitated and apologetic he was. I did not quite know how to receive him. And he did not quite know how to tell me what had occurred."

He paused. Coello thought it wiser to stay silent. He linked his fingers and propped his elbows on the chair-arms, trying to look relaxed while the blood drummed in his ears.

"Well. H-r-mp-h." Just once, Mollit's eyes skittered away. They snapped back, and he frowned, as if regretting that lapse. "Guard Ragan told me of your visit to the wizard."

Coello allowed a nod.

"His men did not quite know what to do. They were told to guard the wizard closely. They had not expected a visitor."

"It was hardly a visit."

"Aye. Well. Confused the men, Ragan said. He didn't like it. Nor do I."

"I saw the ward-spells."

"Aye. Long as they're there, there's no chance of the wizard's escape. He'll be in that cell until he rots."

"Then what's the problem?"

The quiet question disconcerted Mollit, as Coello had known it would. If there was no chance of release, then there should be no reason to bar his seeing the wizard. And that was a folly he doubted he would repeat.

Mollit shifted in the uncushioned chair. After clearing his throat again, he fixed his beady eyes on the younger man. "Tell me, my lord prince, why did you go to the dungeon?"

That was getting to the matter with a vengeance. "I don't know," he said honestly and hoped he was believed.

"Did he draw you there? Mesmerize you?"

"With ward-spells on him? No. No, there was no compulsion. Believe me, after eight years as his slave, I would know if he had spelled me." He didn't know why he added the last, unless it was to convince Mollit to trust him. It was true but also unnerving to hear the

words rush out, unplanned.

"Have you gone before?"

Afraid of what more would emerge from his unruly tongue, Coello shook his head.

"And you said no word to him? Gave him no sign?"

"No word, nothing. The guards would tell you."

"They did."

At that, Coello's heart thumped louder. Mollit had interrogated the guards yet still deemed it necessary to speak with him. What had the guards said? With his position already precarious, how much had their answers cut from under him?

"And you don't know why you went?"

"No." Honestly, hoping it showed in his eyes, Coello ventured, "I've wanted to go several times, just to see him there. Last night I was on the steps before I realized that's where my wanderings had taken me. I just...went on. To see, that's all."

"Your wanderings?"

He flushed, not wanting to admit the weakness. "Some nights I can't sleep. I walk. The halls, the gardens, the ram-parts."

"The town."

"You've heard."

"Aye."

So, he was watched. He had guessed it, had known, but to have it confirmed was as if a weight pressed upon his chest. Another gossamer strand, tightening the web around him.

Mollit's beady eyes had narrowed at his silence. Coello deliberately continued it. The advisor had come to him; let him guide this silken interrogation. Only the guilty rush into speech, he reminded himself.

The man shifted, again cleared his throat. Coello had the impression he was ready to leave. When Mollit merely settled anew in the hard chair, his hope sank, and he realized how much he hated to be questioned, probed at, distrusted.

"You think you'll go to the dungeons again?"

"No, I — I don't know."

"I believe that, young man. I believe you're having a hard time settling back in. I told the king that. He is concerned."

"The king knows," Coello asked slowly, "of the trip last night?"

"Aye, but he'll say naught on it. He remembers you as you were. We all do. He sees what you are now, as different

as night and day. We'd like the old Coello back, the bright son who lit the palace with laughter and song."

"He's dead. He died years ago, when a wizard made him slave. You can't see what I saw, do what I did, experience all of that without changing."

"My lord prince, if you want to talk—"

"No! Not that."

"It might help you settle back in."

Another flat "no" would only increase Mollit's probing. Coello said, "I'll think about it," knowing he would never broach the past with anyone. They would openly distrust him, hate him even, then.

"Anytime," Mollit pressed. "Even the dead of night."

He forced a smile, small and tremulous, then dropped his gaze to the parqued floor, acting a shyness he didn't feel.

"You want something to help you sleep?"

"No. I'd rather walk than be drugged again."

"You've tried other ways?"

Recalling the long rides, the gambling, the women, Coello smiled grimly. "Oh, I've tried, everything. Walking helps. That's all."

Mollit levered himself up. "You remember. I'll talk, anytime."

"My thanks." Biting his tongue, he watched the advisor waddle across the polished floor. When Mollit's hand touched the door handle, Coello could no longer prevent the question on his lips. "The dungeon? Is it forbidden me?"

Mollit turned, his silken robes hissing. "Nay, we've not done that." A frown creased his brow, lines put there during an eight years Coello had missed. "Must you go?"

"I slept, after."

"If you must then. But try not, if at all possible. I do not advise it, my lord prince." The door closed with a snick.

Coello's gut took hours to unknot.

Try he might, but four nights later he was again on the dungeon stair. He swore and started back — then stopped. If his unconscious wanderings led him here, to see the wizard, maybe here he could unravel the riddle he had become. If not, at least it was better than aimless wanderings.

The guards were unsurprised to see him. Mollit had no doubt smoothed his passage.

Nor was the wizard asleep. The am-

ber eyes shone eerily in the torchlight.

Coello thrust his torch into a wall socket with force enough to knock off glowing embers. They hissed on the damp floor and died. Then the awkwardness of this visit struck him, former slave and enslaved wizard. Nervously he looked around the cell, seeing what he had missed before: the narrowness that preyed on nerves, moldy walls seeping moisture, the filth left by animals that had scurried away at the light. Then there was nowhere else to look.

The wizard's eyes gleamed, with mockery, Coello reckoned, a look that belied the ward-spells imprisoning him more surely than iron and stone. "Have you come again to gloat, young slave?"

Coello winced at his voice. It was rusty with disuse but retained the velvet timbre that stirred the strings of his musical soul.

"Not that then," the wizard husked. "Why? To sing a romance, bittersweet and hopeless, as was your wont?"

He took a step nearer, another, then squatted an arm's length away. "I — I don't know why I've come."

"It isn't wise. They'll whisper of it in the halls above. A first visit can be overlooked; a second, never."

Coello's mouth twisted. "I know it."

"Then leave."

He thought of the restless guards. They couldn't hear what was said, and that likely made them edgier. This, too, would be reported. But Coello shook his head. Somehow, this visit was right for him.

The wizard grimaced and leaned back against the wall. "You were ever madly honorable, a romantic fool, acting without thinking."

"I've thought."

The sherry eyes narrowed, reminding the prince of a great cat watching its prey. He was pleased the look no longer frightened him.

The wizard closed his eyes. A spasm of pain crossed his boned features as he shifted his long legs. The iron links clanked dully. A quick murmur from the restive guards, then one called, "What are you doing there?"

Coello stood, moved so they could see both him and their prisoner. "Nothing. Don't worry. I'm not about to free my former captor."

The guards muttered again but said no more. He squatted on his haunches, eschewing the support of the slimy walls with a shudder.

"You are yet a fool," the wizard said. "The longer you stay, the worse for you. The king's advisors will record this visit. If ever you cross the throne, by deed or mere word, the record will be exhumed, examined, like thrown chicken bones to presage a storm. And with as little accuracy."

"I know that."

"Then why stay? Why come at all?"

He had no answer. Instead, he noted the changes imprisonment had wrought in the wizard. There were bruises under the amber eyes. A scruffy beard had sprouted on his hollowed face. The rich tunic and breeches were caked with mud where he had fallen on the trek here. Coello remembered how fastidious the wizard was. His current state was as much a punishment as the chains and close cell.

But not such a punishment as the crimson ribbon, embroidered with golden ward-spells that gleamed through the grime. The wizard dared not use power against them, dared not even call power as long as the ward-spells chained him.

They were both snared, the wizard by silken bonds of power, he by bonds of distrust. Which were stronger?

Coello sucked in his breath. "What would you do...if you were free?"

One pale eyebrow rose a fraction. "Careful, slave." His eyes flicked to the guards and back. "You should be wary of such questions."

"I was...curious."

"Curious," he echoed strangely. "As you ever were. It brought you under my power once. It may one day take you to a cell such as this." His hand lifted to sweep his surroundings but was caught short by the chain. If anything, that cynical smile deepened.

Coello chewed his lip, wanting an answer even though he didn't know where the question had come from. "Will you answer?"

The mockery returned, gleaming in the amber eyes, coloring the dry husk of voice. "What would I do?" Again one brow quirked. "Why, ravage the countryside, of course. Gut the chief captains of the king's army. Torture his advisors. Kill the king and put you, my minion, on the throne. What else, my princeling?"

He lied. Coello knew it, just as he knew the advisors would never believe it, as they did not believe him.

It didn't answer his question. The lie told more surely than words that the

wizard did not trust him.

And Coello didn't blame him.

This time Mollit came earlier. He levered his bulk into a chair across from Coello as the young man broke the night's fast. The advisor held his tongue, refusing sweetbread and wine. He drummed his fingers on the chair-arm, visible impatience that sped Coello through his meal.

When at last the servant had cleared, Mollit templed his fingers and looked over their tips at the prince. "You saw the wizard again last night."

"I tried not to go."

"The guards said you spoke with him."

Coello scooted away from the table and crossed his legs, buying time while he decided how much and how little to say. Mollit, however, was too impatient to sit through more silences.

"The king is not pleased."

"Nor am I." He allowed himself a grimace, little realizing how it echoed the wizard's. "I tried to avoid going. Last night I wasn't successful."

"Did he call you with power?"

Coello looked up from his clenched



hands. "No," he said, wondering why the adviser asked that again when both knew the ward-spells still bound the wizard. "No, he didn't call. I just...had to go, had to talk with him."

"As you went to him eight years ago."

"I didn't!" He stopped, tried more calmly. "I didn't seek him out eight years ago. I was hunting, and he took me, enslaved me!" At the naked spiraling of his voice, he wanted to bite off his tongue.

Mollit shrugged, as if that earlier event no longer mattered. Coello knew otherwise, knew it always would. His blood iced as he realized how little they trusted him. Even less than he had thought. His status as royal nephew was probably all that stood between him and the dungeons. His prison was not of stone but instead spun of rich silk and gossamer words.

"The guards said you spoke with him," Mollit persisted. "They could not hear what was said."

"He said I was a fool to visit him, that it would bring trouble."

"Well, well." The advisor's plucked brows rose. "I would not have thought he cared what happened to you. Is that all he said?"

"I didn't stay long. I have never liked being called a fool."

Mollit didn't reply, and Coello clamped his mouth down on more. If the guards had heard his last question, then he doubted he would be here now. Nay, if that had happened, he would be in a damp cell. He strove to keep his face empty of expression, to let Mollit lead the conversation, although every nerve and sinew screamed.

The advisor sighed and shifted his bulk. The beady eyes shone between pink lids. "I do not like these visits, Coello. I told you before. I do not see what purpose they serve."

"I...cannot help myself, Mollit. I want them less than you. But when I can't sleep, when I'm restless and everything presses on me—"

"Then you find yourself in the dungeons. So you told me. But it isn't wise, young man."

Coello dropped his gaze, putting on a shamed front. "I know. I want to stop. I did try, Mollit."

The puffy lips pursed. "Does it help?" Concern crept into his voice.

The words came without prompting, scaring Coello with their truth. "I think it is the seeing him, imprisoned, chained, bound by the ward-spells. I

think that...eases me. I no more like the going of it than any of you, Mollit. Maybe with time, or the wizard's death..."

The advisor frowned. Coello's nerves tightened, stretching as thin as a spider's strand. Crazy, he wondered if the dungeon would be an easier prison than this one. At least then he could see his bonds.

Mollit heaved himself up, startling the young man into a revealing flinch. The advisor stared down, the beady eyes unblinking, holding Coello's with power stronger than that of his office. Then he frowned, and his fat lips pursed into a button. "Be careful, my lord prince. You walked a fine line last night."

"I realize that now, Mollit. You are a friend to help me so."

"Would a friend let you continue this folly? Go. Gloat if you must. As many times as you need. But never again pass the door."

"I swear, Mollit. And thank you."

His earnestness was sincere, but the advisor merely grunted. "My door is still open to you, my lord prince. I would see you back in the royal fold."

The next days and nights were like a fever-dream to Coello.

Mollit no longer visited him, for he no longer visited the wizard. The knowledge that he was trapped in a silken web haunted him. He caught himself walking with shoulders hunched, hands shaking, as if expecting the strands of the cocoon to tighten at any moment.

He dared not see the wizard. As Mollit said, that way was truly his destruction. Yet time and again he found himself on the dungeon stairs, once at the very door. He stalked determinedly back to the bright palace above, cursing the unconscious will that lured him.

With his cousins he sought more amusements, falling to them with abandon. In the midst of their fellowship, however, Coello's isolation grew. He longed to speak of the fear that shadowed him and haunted his dreams, yet none of them understood his years of captivity, when that fear had been born. He could not even name it himself. He knew merely that it was there, connected to his belief in his own self and to what others believed he would do.

The only one who might understand was the wizard — and Coello would not, dared not go to him.

Finally, he knew it came to a matter of trust. All of it — his isolation, his restlessness, his fear — was born of their lack of trust. He also knew what would give him acceptance: if the wizard were gone. If he were never again to be tempted into what his family perceived as betrayal. If sorcery no longer corrupted him in their eyes.

The only way to insure that was if the wizard were dead.

Coello shuddered at the idea. He had never killed coldly before. Yet he weighed its merits, rationally examined his choices. While the wizard lingered, rotting in the dungeons, Coello would go mad, driven insane by his alienation. Or he could kill the wizard, excising the cause of distrust from existence, gaining his freedom through blood.

Even knowing he was watched, it was a simple matter for Coello to hide the dagger. Procuring the sleeping draught was no more than a simple errand for a cousin with exotic proclivities. The hard part was pretending all was well, that life was better for him. Mollit was among those who noticed the change. He smiled and nodded at the prince across the throne room during the king's pronouncements. The younger man wanted to laugh at the advisor's blindness, at the blindness of them all. They saw what they wanted to see and not the widening chasm he crossed on a single strand of web.

He lulled them a week, ten days, a fortnight that stretched in infinite measure of smiles and laughter and songs. On the night a pretty cousin wed a peer of the realm, he acted. Feeling like a traitor, knowing he was one yet again, he drugged the ale to be sent to the dungeon sentries, laughed with the guards who would relieve them while he slipped more of the draught into their drinks. He joined his family in revelry until the youngest and the oldest had long since retired and the others were too drunk to care. Then he retrieved his dagger and wended down to the dungeons.

The guards snored at their posts, oblivious to his presence and the ill it portended. The lone sentry at the wizard's door was also asleep, smacking his lips while he dreamed.

Coello slit the ward-spell and threaded it from the lock. He fingered the embroidered silk, tracing the spells, then flung it down the passage into

darkness. The chain rattled as he inserted his filched keys. Anxiously he looked back at the guards, was reassured by their snores.

The wizard looked up, eyes widening, as Coello entered. He said naught as the younger man thrust the torch into a socket, but his breath hissed when he saw the knife glint as Coello faced him.

"So, you have come to kill me."

Coello raised the dagger. The light caught the wicked length of the blade.

"Aye."

"Will that end your misery?"

"Aye."

He tilted his head back, closing his amber eyes and exposing his long neck.

"Then do it, for I too am weary of this misery."

Coello swallowed and put the knife to the wizard's throat. Blood beaded on the steely tip, then he hesitated. What would his punishment be when this act was discovered? Would they think he was mad?

"Why do you wait?"

He backed up and stared at the crimson drop staining the blade. His gaze shifted to the wizard. "I asked you

once what you would do if I freed you. You lied then. Will you lie to me now?"

"Nay, slave, I'll not. The world is too wide for revenge."

"So what would you do?"

"Go on to the next country, the next beyond it. So should you. Get free of this palace, with its corruption and pettiness and lies. You have a fine voice; I thought once to set you free as a bard. My love of music kept you too long." He closed his eyes. "Now I only want my misery to end. Kill and have done with it, slave. Your uncle the king will thank you for doing what he had no nerve to do."

Coello looked again at the dagger, at the red drop trickling down the blade's edge. The wizard's description of the palace echoed deep, unraveling all the tangles in his mad-spun cocoon.

He saw clearly where his own road led. With a quick jerk he snapped the ward-spell. He didn't look up as he unlocked the manacles at the wizard's wrists and ankles.

"You're a fool, slave."

"So you said before." He helped the wizard up. He was unsteady on his feet, but his hand fastened like a hawk's

talon on Coello's shoulder. The younger man looked up then, into the amber eyes. "Can you get us out of here, without the guards knowing it?"

"Get me away from the ward-spells, to cleaner air."

Coello led him to the dungeon's anteroom. The wizard looked at the drugged guards. "You know what you've done, princeling? You can never come back."

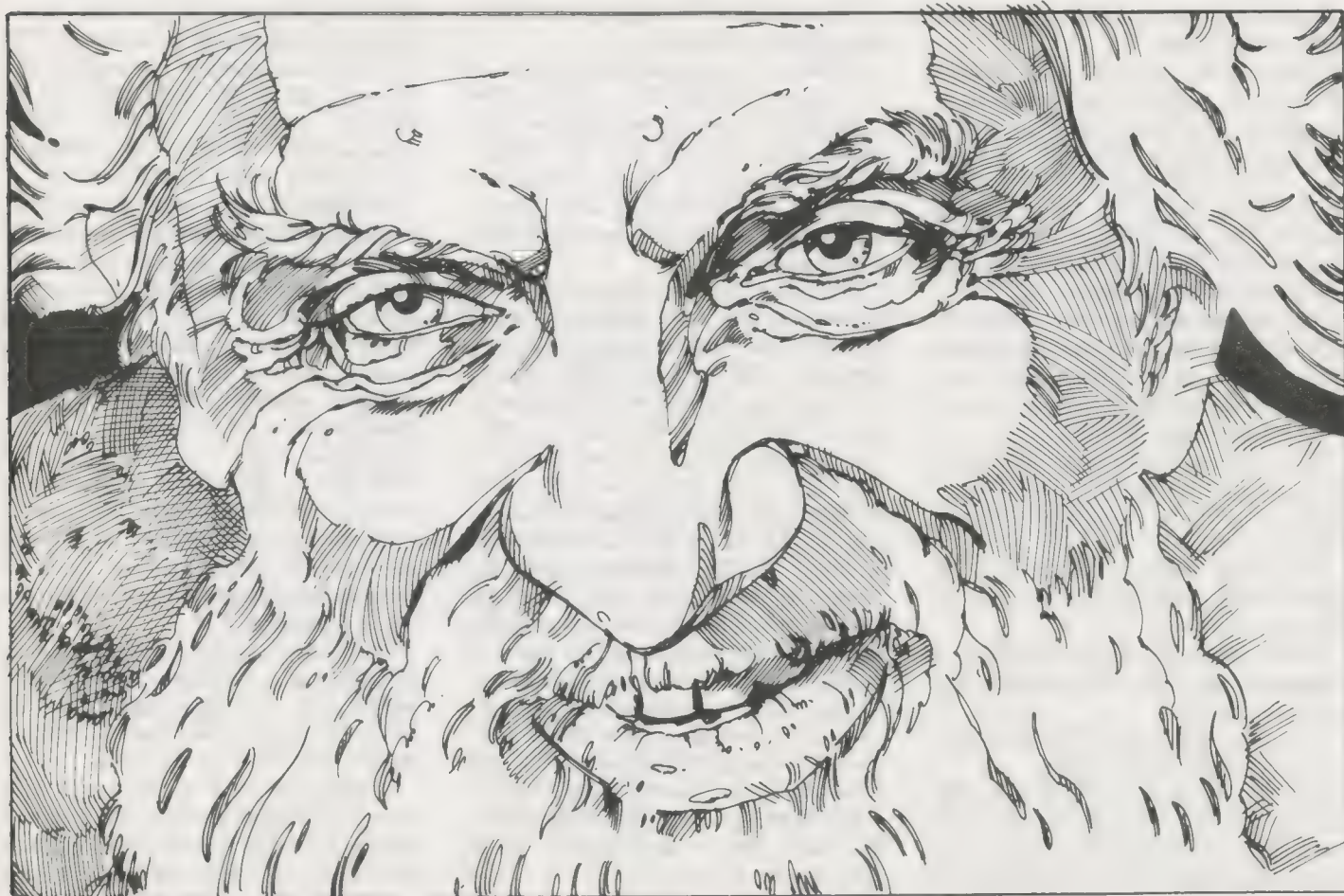
"Aye. Make me that roving bard, wizard, and set me free."

The amber eyes rested on him a moment. Then the wizard raised one hand as if he were parting a curtain, only the world parted instead, opening to a dark forest where water splashed into a moon-bright pool and birds trilled songs to the stars. With the wizard, Coello left the dungeon and stepped into a new place, one where he could spin his own future.



EMILY R. DUNN lives in Georgia where she teaches English. This is her first sale.

JAMES BALKOVEK heads Black Eagle Productions, a graphic arts studio in Antioch, California.



Artwork by James Balkovek

String Figures

by Tracey S. Rosenberg

I sang quietly, practicing a psalm of praise to the life forces imbedded in the forest, but even the beautiful cadences could not soothe my bitterness. It had only been two months since I had come to the northern village of Hanni. I had been eager, knowing I would be helping people who slaved for their survival, people who lived far from established temples, who had little leisure time and few festival days. I did not care that my lodgings were crude, or that the rain hardly ceased, or that the lone tavern's ale was weaker than cider; the year was to be spent preparing for my final years of training, and rough surroundings would not distract me from that. The perfect place for my year outside the temple walls.

But instead of bringing happiness to people — the truest responsibility of a poet — I spent most days wandering among the forest's denizens, the silent trees and the small creatures. Droplets fell from the hanging leaves, and squirrels shivered past me as they hoarded their winter meals before the rain froze into snow. My cloak, befitting my low rank, was unhooded, and my wet hair fell down my neck and upper back.

Roise, my Fiorfile, had decreed I would come to this place, and of course I had accepted without question. I had trained hard, and only in the past two years had I been allowed to perform alone in public. I was eager to finally use the skills I had labored so long to perfect. In a village of near to two hun-

dred people, I naturally expected that I would be asked for my share of songs; and the villagers did stop me in the road and ask for tales. But I began to notice that if another poet accompanied me, my companion was always asked for a story instead of me. Caolan, the eldest poet, recited most; that was only natural, when he had completed his learning. But Shana was only a year more advanced, and Deain my equal. Yet the villagers continually chose them over me, leaving me on the side with a false smile as I battled jealousy and the rising tide of my inferiority.

Every night, the villagers gathered in the tavern to hear us, and then I took part equally, but I felt their attention drifting away like the wisps of smoke from the slow-burning fire.

My assignment had become my banishment, because my greatest happiness was to be surrounded by a crowd, especially of children; to recite the legends of Jamin or take a piece of string and tell a story by it as I twisted it into shapes only children and poets truly understood.

I had voiced my dissatisfaction to Roise, when she stopped in Hanni on her way to the city of Kerati.

"How are you finding it?" she had asked. The two of us had walked up the main lane as the sun set, during a brief spell without rain.

I sighed, not wanting to complain of my duty. "Horrible," I admitted. "The people want to hear stories, but not

from me. They smile when they pass me, and sit with me in the tavern, but I may as well not be a poet for all they care."

"Caolan is dedicated and far more advanced," Roise reminded me gently. "Shana is more polished."

"But Deain? We should be equals."

"Not in the minds of the villagers. They tell me that magic spills from his lips."

I silenced, frustrated at my inability to explain an expanding sense of inadequacy. True enough that I had only been training for fourteen years, with at least six more before I dedicated myself; but sometimes in the night I burst out from horrible dreams, envisioning myself about to don my sacred blue and gold belt only to clasp it in my hands and find it slashed to ribbons. Caolan had assured me that questionings about ability were normal, even in my advanced stage of training, but a ghost of deficiency infiltrated every melody, every verse I sang.

Roise stopped; we had reached the boundary of the village, and I waited for her to retrace our path. But she paused.

"The villagers do not spurn you because they dislike you," she said slowly. "This will be the year of your greatest advancement."

I nodded humbly, watching the traces of silver in her hair.

"You will discover the source of your

distress; I am sure of that. Your spirit is resolute enough that you will not abandon your vocation, even when faced with so great an obstacle."

"Then help me," I pleaded. "I don't

know how to fight this. Let me come back to the temple—"

"To avoid confrontation? You have been doing that for a long time, and I have not known how to help you. You

have worked hard; no one can question your persistence. I have watched you practice a single line for an hour until you felt satisfied."

I was pleased at her praise. Sometimes, all that had resulted from my perfectionism was a scolding from my teacher for not having gone on to my next lesson.

"Your skill is impeccable for a poet of your level. You will never regret your efforts. However... you must leave your skill alone now, and open yourself to what you will achieve. You try too much; you struggle when you should ease. This is all I can advise."

With that proclamation, she began walking, and I, having nothing to answer, followed.

Roise departed for Kerati without further comment, but I still paced into the forest daily. I had few alternatives; Caolan, with his quiet voice verging on command, had advised me not to recite for more than one person at a time. "I realize this sounds odd," he had said, "but it will help you concentrate on yourself rather than on your audience." I could almost hear Roise's voice behind his.

This eliminated the tavern gatherings, for although it was wrong and petty, I had no desire to watch the people crowd around Deain as he performed stories I knew just as well.

As I walked deeper into the forest, I pulled a piece of twine from my pocket, absently twisting it into familiar patterns — the little fish hiding in mud; Alsa's three diamonds; the storm-clouds, not quite as dour as those which had smothered the village since Roise's departure. I threw that figure off and tried a different one, but the sun breaking through clouds eluded my fingers,



Artwork by Ray Williams

as if they had forgotten how to make even a representation of sunlight.

I threw the twine to the ground. All my life, since the poets had chosen me at the age of eight, I had known my choice, known it like my own face. What defect was so cancerous that I risked the overthrow of my vocation?

"Poet?" a small voice asked.

I turned. One of the village children stood on the path. She wore a shawl thrown over her little shoulders, and her head was bare.

"Why are you out in the rain?" I asked, kneeling. "You'll catch cold."

"I wanted to see you do figures." She pointed to the twine. "The other poet said you could do them."

It was true that twine-stories were not a standard part of a poet's training, but I had elected to learn them, mastering the intricate maneuverings in order to enchant the children. None of the other poets in Hanni knew any.

I picked up the twine, determined to overcome my fears.

"Do you know the story of the man who stole tallow-dips?"

The girl shook her head.

I arranged the string on my fingers.

"Once there was a man, who stole four tallow dips from his neighbor, and brought them home and hung them by his door..."

The girl's eyes followed every twitch as I worked the strings, demonstrating how the man fell asleep until darkness fell, when he woke and cut off one of the tallows to light it.

"But the guard caught him, and looped rope around his wrists, to prevent his escape."

In the final figure, the string was wrapped around my own wrists, and I waited for the girl's face to blossom into happiness. Instead, she frowned.

"I'll do another," I said hastily, refiguring the string. "A woman had a pig, that she wanted to sell at market..."

I insisted the words, forcing her to hear, but the more I thrust them at her the further she retreated.

"...and the pig was in its pen, eating its corn."

She shook her head, dissatisfied. Her solemn face wore the same pinched look I had seen on the villagers: interest for the story's ending, but behind that a detachment, as if my words were not touching their hearts.

"Oh," I breathed, beginning to understand. I thought of Deain, who had always struggled with the specific parts

of recitation, but who captivated everyone who listened, as if sheer joy impelled his story towards them.

A third story, just one more, to confirm my doubt, capture it and strangle it. I had sweated with this story, the twine rubbing skin from my fingers before I had mastered it. But more than that, I tingled with its excitement. I *had* to tell the girl.

"A Swordbearer rode out, to battle her fiercest enemy..."

Roise had taught me this story, about the woman who overcame her fear of fire to defeat her greatest adversary. It still amazed me that such precise and complex patterns could be made from a simple piece of twine, and I let that amazement play through my fingers and my voice, stretching it to the girl before me, who stared at my hands and absorbed every motion even as the rain pelted her shawl; for it was beating harder, but the girl did not move, and neither did I, except within the story.

"...when the demon struck her heart with sparking blue flame..."

Opening my heart, I breathed light as my god's power flowed through me; exulting in the glory of poetry, my voice, my hands were instruments for sharing rapture. Technical skills no longer masked my fear, for I had no more fear.

"...with her final cry, she thrust her sword forward, and the demon screamed as the sword shattered him into a million pieces."

I snapped my hands apart and the pattern unraveled. I stared at the trembling string, knowing how it felt as I too quivered with joy.

"Shuddering, the Swordbearer turned away, to continue her long journey home."

My breath halted in my chest as I waited for the girl's response.

"That was lovely," she said with clear honesty. "But Mum will want me home now."

"Wait—I know others." Though my hands still shook, I gathered the twine into a ball. "If you like, I can show you another time."

She grinned—the first wide-open, radiant smile I had known in Hanni. "Yes, please."

As she skipped away, I savored the bliss I had never before tasted. My long hours of discipline had neither hinted at, nor prepared me for, the shivering rapture of genuine storytelling. I blessed Roise for her wisdom, which had jolted me into realizing that in order to perform sincerely, I needed to live each story for every person who listened; even—especially—a young girl watching string figures in the rain.

I started back to the village, working the twine into my favorite pattern even as the sun broke through the clouds to mirror the picture in my hands.

✱

TRACEY S. ROSENBERG is a recent graduate in English from U.C. Berkeley, with publications in literary and student magazines. Tracey would like to dedicate this story to Micah Fogel.

RAY WILLIAMS has won numerous awards for his work at conventions and art shows. His first children's book will be coming out this year. He shows his work at the WIZARDS art gallery in Kirkland, Washington.

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The Prince of her Heart's Desire

by Linda Dunn

The seven beautiful daughters of King Frederick the Bold walked through the garden before breakfast.

"Kiss me. Please kiss me," called a voice from the pond.

"Oh, look." Aurora, the oldest and most beautiful of the seven princesses, pointed toward the water. "There's a frog sitting on a lily pad over there. I wonder if he's really a handsome prince who has been turned into a frog by an evil witch. Perhaps all he needs is for a beautiful princess to come along and kiss him to break the spell."

"I have. Oh, I have been enchanted indeed." The frog leaped from one lily pad to another in excitement.

"Kiss me, please. Kiss me and I will turn into your heart's desire."

Aurora reached out for the frog but her youngest sister, Gloriana, was faster.

"Hold it right there!" Gloriana snatched the frog from the water before her sister could reach it.

"How do we
k n o w
you're

really an enchanted prince?" She set the frog upon the palm of her hand and eyed it suspiciously. "You could be just an ordinary little green frog and kissing you could give my sister a bad case of warts. King Eric the Brave wouldn't want to marry her if she was an ugly, wart-faced princess."

"You're right!" Aurora gasped and her hands flew to her face. She turned quickly to see her reflection in the water and re-
laxed
vis-
ibly

when she saw it was wart-free.

Somewhat abashed at her sudden panic, Aurora squared her shoulders and lifted her head high. Her sisters were giggling madly and she refused to be the brunt of their childish laughter.

"I didn't really want to kiss that ugly old frog anyway, Aurora said. "If I did, he would belong to me and I am already betrothed to a king. Since none of you six have any prospects of marriage, I will leave him to you."

With that, Aurora turned on her heel and walked briskly back to the castle.

Gloriana grinned madly as she watched her oldest sister disappear down the path. One down and five to go.

She looked back at the frog, who was obviously very unhappy at the sudden turn of events. He leaned forward in a most un-frog-like way and spoke in a voice dripping with anger.

"That was
pure fool-
ishness
and
you
know
it.
Toads
give warts.
Frogs do
not."



The Last Word

He hopped around on her hand, turning to face the other sisters. "I am enchanted and I beg you all please, won't one of you lovely princesses kiss me and free me from this awful spell? There are six of you. Surely one of you wants me to turn into a handsome prince."

He hopped up and down in place for a moment as he realized they were not moving.

"Kiss me and I will turn into your heart's desire. I promise I will."

The four older princesses looked at one another nervously and then began to argue among themselves. There were four princesses of marriageable age and only one frog. Who would kiss him?

Gloriana solved the problem for them. While they were arguing, she bent over and kissed the frog quickly on the top of its head.

"You cheated!" shouted the older sisters as they saw the frog transformed.

The littlest princess shrugged her shoulders and said, "When you're at the end of a long queue you learn how to find ways to cut through the line."

As the second oldest sister opened her mouth to complain, the second youngest princess started giggling.

"It's not funny!" The princesses shouted as one, and then found themselves giggling too. Within moments, all the princesses were laughing loudly.

"He's very handsome," said the third-oldest princess between outbursts of laughter.

"And he looks well mannered, too," the second-oldest princess said between giggles. "Very well, youngest sister. There's not much we can do about this now, anyway. I believe this formerly enchanted frog belongs to you."

"Hurrah!" The princess threw her arms around the prince's neck and then leaped upon his back.

"Run, Prince! Run, my swift stallion!" She kicked the sides of the former frog, who was now a beautiful white pony.

They raced down the garden path, the pony protesting all the way that this was not what he had in mind at all. *

LINDA DUNN is a computer specialist active on CompuServe's sf forum and living in Indianapolis, Indiana, with her husband, two children, the usual assortment of cats, and a miniature horse (*not* named "Prince"). This is her third professional sale.

PETER MEKIS is a graphic design student at Pittsburgh Technical Institute in Pennsylvania.

Well, it's spring already, and another issue has drawn to a close. We realized that in later years, this will be known as "The Vampire Issue". And it's probably the only time you'll ever see us with a computer on the cover! We hope you enjoyed Misty's new "Diana Tregarde" story, though Heather pointed out a paradox: we have a story warning young women not to get to caught up with fictional vampires — told from the viewpoint of a character with a lover who is vampire. Just remember: it's fiction. It's FICTION.

Spring means that I am off to NorWesCon tomorrow as soon as the issue is at the printer and the staff meeting is over. Marion has a new novel coming out which we hope everyone will enjoy: it's a prequel to *MISTS OF AVALON* called *THE FOREST HOUSE*. And Elisabeth Waters, a long-time associate of Marion's (see the opening editorial for a list of a tiny fraction

of the jobs she's done for Marion over the years), also has a novel coming out, a DAW book called *CHANGING FATE*. Theoretically it's an April book, which means that if I hadn't been so busy lately with pasteup, I probably could have found a copy at my local specialty bookshop.

We've got some terrific stuff lined up for you in the next few issues: artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean (she made me promise to let her illustrate a story with a horse in it), Gail Butler, Dameon Willich, George Barr, and the man who seems to be everyone's new favorite, Ray Williams. We have cover stories scheduled by Jo Clayton and Tanya Huff, as well as stories by Laura Underwood, Steven Piziks, Jill Pollock, Rebecca Lloyd, L.S. Silverthorne, and Darrell Schweitzer.

Stay tuned.

— Rachel E. Holmen *

Stories for Mature Eleven-Year-Olds (and for Grown-Ups)

When the movie rating system was new and still a bit controversial, I read an article that quoted a child who was miffed that all the good movies seemed to rated for people older than she (or he) was. "Why don't they make more movies for mature eleven-year-olds?" The point was, it's not like the only way to tell a good story is with sex or violence.

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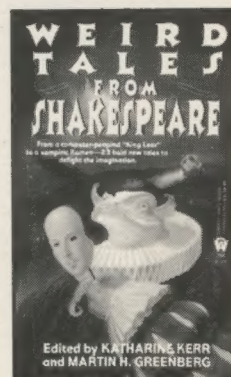
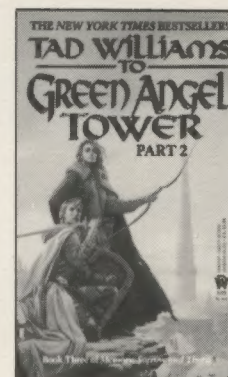
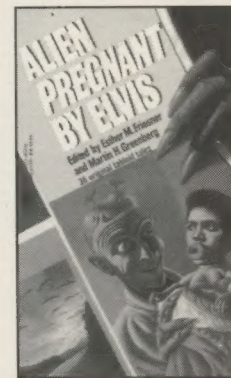
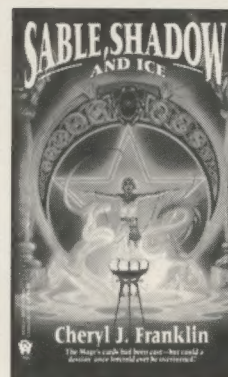
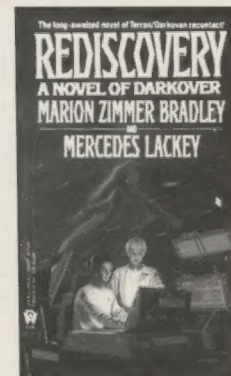
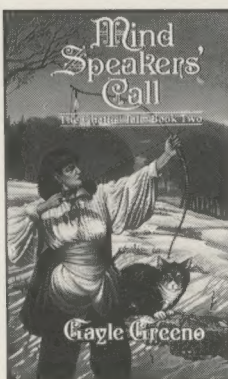
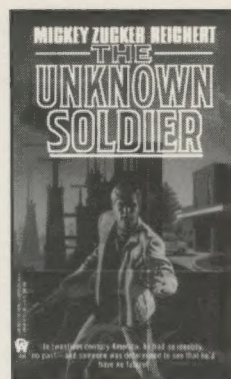
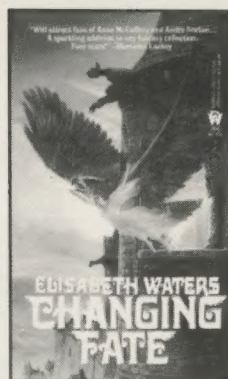
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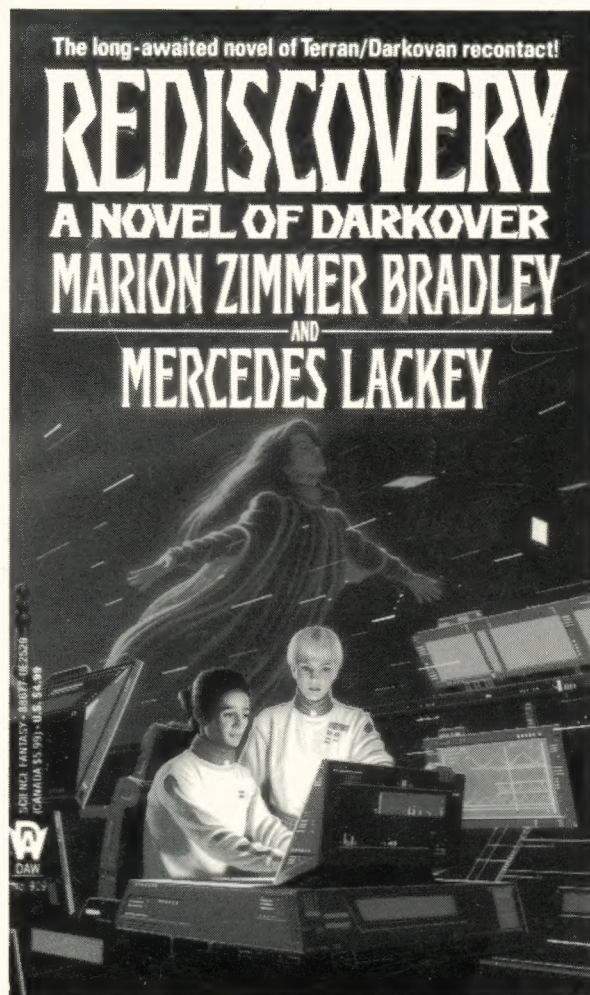
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